Inputs for study on the solutions to promote digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats

Introduction:

The ownership and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has been growing around the world and Kenya has reaped significant benefits and accolades as a result of its homegrown innovation-driven ecosystem. Safaricom, iHub, and Kenya Innovation Week (KIW) are examples of Kenya's pioneering mobile money technology, start-up incubation centre, and ecosystem development platforms. The country's high mobile penetration rates have also led to the acceptance and accelerated use of digital solutions and ICTs in daily life.

Arid and Semi Arid lands (ASAL) make up 89% of the Country with approximately 38% of Kenya's population. These areas suffer from shocks ranging from natural resource conflicts, climate change induced conflict, and political crises. These shocks extend to the education sector as well leading to challenges in the delivery, quality and access to education. Technology has the power to reduce these barriers as well as scale education programs to areas with little access.

Recognising the role of ICT in building skills for young people in education, the Government of Kenya has made national and international commitments towards integrating digital technology in education (ILO 2021). Under former President Kenyatta's administration, efforts to meet these commitments were accelerated through initiatives such as the Digital Literacy Programme launched in 2016. This initiative provided over 1.2 Million devices to teachers to integrate ICT in learning.

To support the development of a talent pipeline among youth especially young women needed to participate in higher education and engage in the innovation ecosystem as well as the digital economy, digital skills and education are integral tools for inclusion, ensuring poor, rural and refugee communities, women and girls, and persons with disabilities are active participants in the economy. Effectively building a talent pipeline   starts early and throughout basic education to build a solid digital literacy foundation that is complemented by 21st century and soft skills.

In Kenya's ecosystem, a multi-stakeholder approach has been key to progress and building a foundation through last mile connectivity, teacher capacity building and reskilling, and updated national policies. Kenya is well positioned to build on these successes, learn from challenges, and leapfrog its education sector as a model for how nationwide digital education initiatives can responsibly expand opportunities for youth.

However, as implementation and use of digital technology expands access to education, it also increases risks of human rights violations if adequate safeguards are not in place. Risks around safety, privacy, inequality and misinformation have been prevalent.

This response is informed by available data and insights, and aims to contribute to the High Commissioner's study by highlighting key challenges and good practices in Kenya's context.

Challenges to Accessing Digital Education:

While Kenya has made significant strides in integrating ICT into education, the digital divide persists, disproportionately impacting marginalised groups including young women in rural areas and informal settlements.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the deep digital divide within Kenya's education system; according to Onesmus, G. (2020) alarming deficiencies in ICT access and skills among students

and teachers exist. Disrupted learning brought to light the critical importance of professional pedagogy and instructor capacity to support delivery of digital education.

Some of the key challenges faced include; Infrastructure gaps with limited access to electricity, the internet and digital devices particularly in rural areas leads to marginalisation of young people; high cost of devices and data access create barriers to affordable access; Low digital literacy among teachers and students limits utilisation of digital tools and resources; Girls and young women often face additional cultural and socio-economic barriers to technology access and usage, further widening the gender digital divide; Mainstream educational content and platforms often lack accessibility features, the high cost of technical devices for persons with disabilities leads to exclusion of students with disabilities.

Government Initiatives:

The Government through the Ministry of Education has prioritised the integration of ICT and digital skills through various policies and initiatives. Policy documents that aim to promote innovative transformation and guide the future direction of the Kenyan education sector include the National Education Sector Strategic Plan, 2018–2022, and the Policy Framework for Reforming Education and Training for Sustainable Development in Kenya, 2019 (Government of Kenya 2019a).

The 2006 National ICT Strategy outlines key focus on enhancing infrastructure, increasing access, facilitating technical support and integrating digital content into the education system. This led to initiatives such as the 2016 Digital Literacy Program that upskilled over 80,000 teachers to deliver digital content and aimed to connect all public primary schools to the internet by 2023. The 2018-2022 Education strategic plan emphasised competency-based, learner centred education to increase access and participation, raise the quality and relevance and improve governance and accountability in education, training and research with an emphasis on Science, Technology and Innovation relevant to the labour market.

In addition, Government supported programs such as Schools Connectivity Initiative (SCI) by Kenya Education Network (KENET) and Digischool in collaboration with Huawei and UNESCO which are connecting primary schools to the internet, Ajira Digital funded by the Mastercard foundation that is providing digital skills training and employment opportunities for youth, the Kenya Education Cloud that hosts open learning resources, and curriculum reforms are aimed at enhancing access to digital education. While these initiatives create significant impact, challenges around infrastructure gaps, affordability barriers, educator capacity, and effective content development continue to exist and slow progress at scale.

Protecting Young People Online:

As access to digital technologies increases across Kenya, so do the risks around safety, privacy, inequality and misinformation. The government has taken steps to enhance online safety especially for children through creating policies and engaging multiple stakeholders.

Some of these initiatives include a draft National Child Online Protection policy that aims to create a safer digital environment; The Cybersecurity Act 2022 that criminalised online bullying, harassment and exploitation. Existing gaps in legislation include lack of measures recognising and responding to grooming, and no legislation regulating cyber cafes and video dens in parts of Kenya where most young people in rural areas access the internet.

Government agencies work closely with Child Online Protection (COP), specialised agencies such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), Childline Kenya, Watoto Watch Network among others to promote COP awareness, educate the public and establish hotlines that support reporting offences as well as provide counselling to victims.

Challenges to Online Protection:

While the government in collaboration with multi sector stakeholders has initiated online safety policies and programs, gaps still exist around implementation and enforcement of the laws, mental health support and parental awareness. Limited access to resources and training of security personnel hamper investigation and eventual prosecution of online crimes.

Many parents have low digital literacy in relation to online safety and may lack the digital tools to ensure children's safety online. There is also a deeply rooted stigma surrounding gender-based violence, and the misconception that technology-facilitated online abuse and harassment is not as serious or damaging as other forms of gender-based violence. Mental health services such as counselling are often expensive and are out of reach for most families. To address these challenges, multi-sector collaboration, sufficient funding, additional training and grassroot awareness programs are required.

Recommendations:

While the government's digital initiatives have increased connectivity and access, the digital divide remains a major challenge for many marginalised and rural communities. A multi stakeholder approach is necessary to create comprehensive solutions to online safety and protection.

One such solution implemented by Digital Opportunity Trust Kenya involved convening a Gender Equality Community of Practice (GE COP) to build an enabling ecosystem. This convening brought together local community based organisations as well as government institutions such as the Kenya National Library who are implementing programs for digital inclusion and youth livelihoods in the digital inclusion and youth livelihoods sector to learn, iterate, and improve how we all serve the youth communities we work with. Through prioritising the inclusion of young women's voices and leadership by recruiting Young Women Researchers (YWRs) recruited from our Daring to Shift Community Leader program. The young women developed community-based participatory action research to highlight gender equality barriers and online safety as well as Technology facilitated Gender Based Violence.

The outcomes of this research were disseminated among members of the GE COP to increase their knowledge and capacity in creating safe spaces for young women. With this increased capacity, the members of the GE COP were able to operationalise new/updated policies and procedures for gender mainstreaming and safety. As a result, GE COP members will create more inclusive programs and services to encourage an increased number of young women accessing and meaningfully engaging with digital inclusion programs.

The success of this small-scale research can be scaled to a national level through partnership with the Government as well as government agencies such as the National Gender and Equality Commission and the Communications Authority of Kenya to promote gender-equal and safe access to digital education. At a national level, the GE COP would serve as a hub for shared learning, research and facilitation of innovative programs to bridge the digital divide and improve access to digital education while ensuring safety of young people.

Conclusion

The Kenyan government has been at the forefront of technology development — investors are being invited to invest in Nairobi, and are heeding the call positively. VC4A (2016). The country has positioned itself as an investor-friendly city by being open to aid agencies, development funds and foreign nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). The birth of the M-Pesa revolution by Vodafone in 2003 and subsequent launch by Safaricom in 2007 has inspired many to be tech entrepreneurs and to launch start-ups. The launch of iHub in 2010 — as an open space for start-ups — positioned Kenya's capital, Nairobi, as the future of start-ups, technology and innovation. 54 start-ups in Nairobi are on AngelList .

With ever increasing rates of digital penetration in Kenya, ICTs are transforming the face of development and hold the potential to overcome public sector challenges--including the quality of health and education services--digital technologies and services are the new frontier of Kenyan social and economic development. However realising the full potential of digital technologies in education requires not just expanding connectivity and access, but also equipping young people with skills, tools and continuous support to safely and responsibly navigate the ever evolving digital space.

By 2030, Africa will have the world's largest potential workforce, and every job of the future will include a digital component. Kenya's workforce, in particular Kenya's youth workforce, needs to be prepared for the digital disruptions transforming the future of work in their countries. And, youth--more active, tech savvy, entrepreneurial and connected than ever before-- are passionate about creating local solutions to social challenges, and eager to lead Africa's social and economic transformations from within.

Despite the promise of new technologies to usher in economic growth and development, low rates of digital literacy, digital entrepreneurship and digital innovation across the continent-- exacerbated by rural/urban, gender and age-related divides--mean that many countries and many citizens are being left behind, unable to access the benefits of the "Fourth Industrial Revolution".

Recommendations highlighted in this report include; digital literacy skilling and upskilling, increasing access to tools and resources for marginalised communities; building strong local ecosystems; strengthening legal framework and supporting enforcement of policies around online safety; multi stakeholder collaboration and grassroot engagement to create comprehensive child protection solutions and providing mental health support to address GBV including cyber bullying and harassment.

Through these collaborative efforts, we can promote inclusive and safe digital education to young people, helping them realise their potential while keeping them safe in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

ANNEX 1: REFERENCES

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