Submission to OHCHR Study on the solutions to promote digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats

in accordance with Human Rights Council Resolution 51/17

Submitted to the OHCHR on February 6, 2024

I.   BACKGROUND

IIMA - Istituto Internazionale Maria Ausiliatrice is an international NGO in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. IIMA is present in 97 countries where it provides education to children, adolescents, and youth to build up strategies for youth empowerment and participation worldwide.

VIDES International - International Volunteerism Organization for Women, Education, and Development is an NGO in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, which works in 49 countries worldwide. It was founded in 1987 to promote youth volunteer service at the local and international levels for ensuring human rights, development, and democracy. Through its network of young volunteers worldwide, VIDES promotes best practices on active citizenship among youth.

IIMA and VIDES, together with other NGO partners, have been working for the empowerment of young people worldwide, not only by reporting existing protection gaps in the implementation of human rights with regard to youth, but also by greatly valuing the crucial role of youth in the promotion of human rights for society at large. Accordingly, both NGOs have been active in calling the attention of the Human Rights Council and other UN human rights bodies on the specific situation of youth in order to ensure that the rights of youth are placed high on the list of priorities.[1]

The present joint contribution intends to respond to the call for inputs launched by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in the framework of the preparation of a detailed study on the solutions to promote digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats, as requested by Human Rights Council Resolution 51/17 (October 2022).

The data and information obtained for this contribution came from the advocacy work carried out by IIMA Human Rights Office and VIDES International in the framework of the UN in Geneva and in collaboration with IIMA and VIDES members on the ground as well as other local partners, including Our Lady of Charity of The Good Shepherd (RGS), the Comboni Missionary Sisters (CMS), and the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions (RNDM). Specific information for this submission was provided by 27 members and partners from the following **16 countries**: Europe (**France, Germany and Spain**), America (**Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Panama,**

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[1] Further information on IIMA and VIDES work in promoting human rights is available at http://iimageneva.org/ .

Nicaragua and Costa Rica), Asia (**Myanmar, Nepal and India**), and Africa (**Kenya and South Sudan**).

When specified, replies to the call for inputs were provided in consultation with and on behalf of a group of civil society actors. Respondents include adolescents (12 to 17 years old) and youth (18 to 35 years old), especially girls and young women, as well as educators/teachers belonging to diverse vulnerable communities.

The inputs provided were clustered by country and added as annexes to the present submission.

II.   PRELIMINARY REMARKS: THE DEFINITION OF YOUTH

While the age-range of 15 to 24 years is often used to identify youth for statistical purposes, this is not always appropriate to tackle the reality of youth worldwide and, more importantly, it is not consistent with the existing international legal framework.[2]

Information provided by our members in several countries across Europe, America, Africa and Asia, shows how the terminology "youth" or "young people" is employed in national legal frameworks and/or in common parlance to refer to an age group ranging from 10 to 35 years old, depending on the Country concerned. This inconsistency/ambiguity does not favor a common understanding and clear identification of the target group nor does it allow for an effective assessment of existing national policies. In fact, some of these national policies, while labeled as "youth policies" could, in reality, be addressed to children/adolescents (0 – 18 years) instead of youth (over 18), or both.

With regard to the age definition of youth, IIMA and VIDES uphold the following:

1. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most universally ratified treaty in history, defines a "child" as "every human being below the age of eighteen years". Despite the fact that the use of the word "youth" may differ from one country to another, the fact remains that, thanks to the CRC, people under 18 already benefit from, or at least are recognized as having a right to a special protection in law and practice.

2. The transition from childhood to youth is particularly delicate and pertinent. Therefore, the effective implementation of children's rights up to age 18, in accordance with the Convention of the Rights of the Child, is a requirement for the full implementation of youth rights and the key condition to unlock youth's potential to promote and protect the human rights of others.

That said, certain key questions remain unanswered, such as: What about people over 18? What about those people who are just over the definition of a "child" and therefore no longer benefit from CRC protection, but who still struggle to have their rights fully recognized, often due to the simple fact of being "young"? How do we address existing protection gaps?

In order better assess the situation of youth and detect human rights implementation gaps, for the purpose of this submission and in accordance with the definition of the CRC, respondents to the call for inputs have been referred to as follows:

- **Adolescents (12 to 17 years old)**

- **Youth or Young people (18 to 35 years old)**

- **Educators/teachers (i.e. adults over 35 working in formal and/or informal education facilities)**

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[2] The Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) considers "every human being below the age of eighteen years" is a "child" and, as a result, benefits from the special protection ensured by the CRC.

III. SUBSTANTIAL INPUTS

A. Main challenges faced by young people in accessing digital education

In reply to question 1, while challenges can vary widely depending on the unique circumstances of each country and community due to the socio-economic, geographic, and cultural context, the main obstacles faced by young people in accessing digital education can be typified as follows:

i. **Lack of infrastructure**. In rural or economically disadvantaged areas, there may be inadequate digital infrastructure, including limited access to high-speed internet, electricity, and necessary devices like computers, tablets or smartphones. Limited access to the internet is further exacerbated in areas affected by unstable political situations, civil war and/or in societies suffering from limited freedom of information, lack of democracy and rule of law.

ii. **Digital Illiteracy**. Many young people may not have the required digital literacy skills to navigate online platforms, use educational software, or engage in virtual classrooms. This is especially true for marginalized populations.

iii. **Financial Constraints**. Some families may face financial challenges in affording digital devices and maintaining a stable internet connection. This disproportionately affects marginalized and vulnerable populations in all countries, not just developing ones. Despite the relatively developed technological infrastructure of the country concerned, young people from low-income families may face difficulties in accessing electronic devices and a stable Internet connection; a situation that leads to digital divide and discrimination.

iv. **Language and Cultural Barriers**. Educational content might not be available in the languages spoken by certain marginalized communities. Additionally, cultural differences may affect the suitability of digital education materials.

v. **Gender Disparities**. Gender-based inequalities may influence access to digital education. In some cases, girls and young women may face cultural or societal barriers that limit their access to online learning opportunities.

vi. **Disabilities and Special Needs**. Young people with disabilities may encounter barriers to accessing digital education if online platforms are not designed to accommodate their needs. This includes issues related to accessibility and adaptive technologies.

vii. **Security and Privacy Concerns**. Some families may be hesitant to engage in digital education due to concerns about online security and privacy. This is particularly relevant in cases where sensitive personal information is involved.

viii. **Limited Support Structures**. Young people in vulnerable situations, such as those without stable homes or adequate parental support, may lack the necessary structure to engage effectively in digital education. This is particularly relevant in cases where the parents / guardians are illiterate or have limited digital skills.

ix. **Exposure to information/images/media unsuited to the stage of personal development of the users**.

x. **Mental Health Challenges and Addictions to digital spaces**. Extended periods of online learning can lead to increased screen time and potential mental health challenges, especially for young people in vulnerable situations who may lack proper emotional support.

xi. **Unequal Educational Opportunities**. Marginalized communities may already face disparities in traditional educational opportunities, and the shift to digital education could exacerbate these inequalities.

xii. **Lack of teachers/educators trained in digital competencies**. The lack of adequate preparation and training of teachers in the effective use of technology can affect the quality of digital education. For a large proportion of students, educators are still not a reference point for guiding them through a digital education process.

B.   Steps undertaken by Governments to ensure that digital education is accessible and promoted among young people.

In reply to question 2, initiatives undertaken by Governments are varied and range from **Tablet Projects**, that supplies schools in order to enhance the learners' skills in digital education, to **Digital Literacy Programs, Digital Library and Virtual Labs** or the publication of **Guidelines, Policy Papers** and other relevant documents on education policy that embraces digital education. Please refer to the Annexes for a more detailed description of relevant initiatives carried out at the local level.

C.   Steps undertaken by Governments to ensure that young people can realize their human rights online in a safe, empowering, and inclusive way

In reply to question 3, several steps have been undertaken by Governments especially with regard to:

i. **Legislation and regulation**: Implement laws and regulations that protect the online human rights of young people, addressing issues such as privacy, digital security, hate speech and online discrimination in order to create a safe and secure online environment.

ii. **Digital education and media literacy**: Develop educational programs to help young people to understand and use information and communication technologies (ICTs) responsibly.

iii. **Awareness raising**: Conduct awareness campaigns on the safe and responsible use of the Internet, addressing issues such as cyberbullying and others.

iv. **Youth participation**: Encourage the active participation of young people in the formulation of policies related to online safety and human rights on the Internet.

v. **Data protection and privacy**: Implement measures to protect young people's privacy online.

Please refer to the Annexes for a more detailed description of relevant initiatives carried out at the local level.

D.   Main gaps and challenges to young people's protection from online threats in law, policy, and practice in your country and the impacts on young people's human rights

In reply to question 4, the main challenges in the protection of young people from online threats include the following:

i. **Lack of Comprehensive Legislation** specifically to address online threats and the protection of young people.

ii. **Limited Enforcement**. Even when laws are in place, enforcement may be weak. This could be due to a lack of resources, expertise, or coordination among different law enforcement agencies.

iii. **Higher risk of exposure of youth to online threats**. Cyber bullying and online harassment are significant challenges for young people. The rapid growth of social media and online communication platforms has exposed young individuals to various forms of online abuse.

iv. **Lack digital-literacy among parents and guardians**. In most cases, parents and guardians are unaware of the ill-effects of digital exposure on mental and emotional well-being of young people.

E. Steps undertaken by Governments to ensure that young people are protected from online threats

In reply to question 5, steps undertaken by Governments range from adoption and implementation of **ad hoc legislation and policies**, to the establishment of **Cyber Crime Agencies** to address violations, and the launch of **Cyber Crime Reporting Portals** to enable the public to report incidents pertaining to all types of cyber-crimes, especially against women and children.

Please refer to the Annexes for a more detailed description of relevant initiatives carried out at the local level.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key recommendations on international measure to promote digital education and protect young people from online threats:

To the OHCHR

1. *Provide guidelines and technical support to the Member States in designing and implementing their policies and programs on youth, with a clear focus on addressing digital divide and online threats.*

To the MEMBER STATES

2. *Systematically mainstream the implementation of the human rights of youth into Special Procedures, Treaty Bodies, and the Universal Periodic Review.*

3. *In the framework of SDGs implementation, undertake all possible measures for the empowerment of young people especially in the exercise of their right to quality education including digital education.*

To the HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

4. *Establish the mandate of a Special Rapporteur on youth and human rights so as to give dedicated attention to the challenges facing youth today.*

5. *Call for a joint General Comment or joint Statement by Treaty bodies on youth rights.*