**Input of**

**The Office of the Special Representative of the**

**United Nations Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict**

**To**

**The High Commissioner for Human Rights’ Study on the Solutions to Promote Digital Education for Young People and to Ensure their Protection from Online Threats**

**February 2024**

1. ***What are the main challenges that young people face in accessing digital education?***

During the consultative process the Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG CAAC) conducted with African youth in 2023 (see point 6.), participants confirmed that digital spaces, including social media, play an increasingly important role in their lives to obtain and share news and other types of information and have become essential for access to education, community engagement, and self-development. At the same time youth participants expressed concerns over potential harms and negative mental health impacts of the use of social media, including due to exposure to cyberbullying and harmful messaging, hate speech, incitement to violence, and rights violations. It was further stressed that a generational gap regarding digital education exists forcing children and young people to navigate digital spaces without appropriate guidance. The young people noted that caregivers and teachers, for example, often lack the digital skills to navigate digital spaces, including social media, and are not in a position to provide guidance and protection to young people. In the same vein, it was noted that existing regulations, laws and policies lag far behind the current realities of ‘life online’. In addition, one of the biggest challenges highlighted by youth participants with regard to accessing digital spaces and education, was the high cost of internet access/mobile data, connectivity issues, and power outages, especially in conflict-affected and rural areas.

1. ***Examples of good practices to ensure that digital education is accessible and promoted among young people (specific laws and regulations, measures, policies, and programmes directed at ensuring young people’s universal access to digital education).***

During the consultative process conducted by the the Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG CAAC) with African youth in 2023 (see point 6.), participants highly recommended to increase counter-messaging to combat harmful content and misinformation and to transform social media into safe spaces for positive engagement, including for youth participation in political, peace and security processes. The work of youth-led civil society organizations was underscored as particularly important in this regard and attendees called for increased support to such organizations and for the full realization of the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda. In line with this notion, the OSRSG CAAC’s youth consultation initiative was highlighted as a best practice. Participants called for increased cooperation with social media companies with the aim to develop safeguarding approaches, and distribute positive counter-messaging.

They also called for digital skills building initiatives to be inclusive of all age groups, and for the publication of messages on digital safety to go beyond social media and also target traditional media, including radio and television programmes and newspapers, to reach older audiences. Several participants called for engaging grassroots civil society actors as multipliers of messages and for partnering with small media outlets in rural areas to promote digital skills. The establishment of parental safety initiatives and partnerships with national education institutions was also recommended. All attendees underlined the need to engage with Governments to strengthen online protections, especially for children and young people. Additional research, increased content monitoring, and new effective policies to safeguard children and youth online were deemed urgently required, including realistic assessments of actual threats and types of online violence and adequate legal and policy responses. Participants also called for increased support to non-governmental organizations working on addressing online threats.

1. ***Examples of good practices to ensure that young people can realize their human rights online in a safe, empowering, and inclusive way.***

See point 6)

1. ***What are the main gaps and challenges to young people’s protection from online threats in law, policy, and practice and the impacts on young people’s human rights?***

During the consultative process conducted by the the Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG CAAC) with African youth in 2023 (point see 6.), participants underlined a worsening trend of misinformation circulating on social media platforms as well as the misuse of such platforms to disseminate hate speech, and fuel gender-based violence, violent extremism, and conflict. Attention was also placed on the prevalence of cyberbullying and cyberstalking with negative impacts on the mental health and development of young people. It was stated that there is an overall lack of reliable information on the types of harmful content children and young people encounter when using social media, and a lack of awareness among these age groups on how to protect themselves. It was noted that even in contexts where laws on cybercrime have been adopted, legislation remains inadequate to address the myriad types of online violence experienced by young people. Legislation on online sexual violence, for example, was often exclusively focused on child pornography, rather than other types of online sexual violence, such as harassment and stalking. Due to lack of content regulation and weak enforcement of rules and regulations, most types of online harm thus remained unaddressed. Attendees stressed that the recruitment and use of children in conflict remained of severe concern, especially in contexts that provide limited access to education for children as well as limited employment opportunities for young people. Participants shared information about parties to conflict misusing social media to recruit and use children by employing sophisticated social media strategies and using harmful masculinity narratives, glorifying the lives of combatants, and creating a sense of belonging to a community or cause to recruit children and young people. Participants noted that children often lack awareness of the harmful consequences of associating themselves with armed groups and forces, which made them particularly vulnerable for recruitment and use. Awareness-raising campaigns on the safe use of digital spaces as well as positive counter-messaging, including messages of peace and unity, were therefore considered essential for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies – online and offline.

1. ***Examples of good practices to ensure that young people are protected from online threats (specific laws and regulations, measures, policies, and programmes).***

See point 6)

1. ***Information on any programs or activities our organization has implemented regarding solutions to protect digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats.***

In 2023, the Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG CAAC), in cooperation with the Office of the African Union Youth Envoy, conducted a consultative process with over 200 young people in Africa to seek their views and recommendations on required response and prevention measures to better protect children and youth in digital spaces, particularly with a view to address the misuse of social media by parties to conflict for the purpose of aiding grave violations[[1]](#footnote-2) against conflict-affected children. The OSRSG CAAC is using the recommendations emanating from the consultative process to design and launch a social media advocacy campaign aimed at raising awareness on and preventing the misuse of digital spaces for the purpose of aiding grave violations against children, to be launched in February 2024, and to inform future initiatives on this issue. The OSRSG CAAC’s campaign is focused on raising awareness about tactics employed by parties to conflict to misuse digital spaces, specifically social media, for the purpose of grave violations against children, in particular the recruitment and use of children, rape and other forms of sexual violence against children, as well as abduction and killing and maiming of children. Key messages are not only focused on informing about risks in digital spaces, but also on raising awareness about the rights of conflict-affected children, providing information about how children and young people can protect themselves in digital spaces, and promoting empowering messages about the positive roles of children and youth in peace and security.

1. The six grave violations against children are recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, abduction, attacks against schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access. Further information about the children and armed conflict mandate can be found here: [Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict – Children and Armed Conflict (un.org)](https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)