



United Nations
Office of the Secretary-General's
Envoy on Youth

CONTRIBUTION TO GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPACT

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL'S ENVOY ON YOUTH

Background

The global development of digital technologies over the past 10 years have significantly advanced. In comparison to 2012 where only 2.4 billion people were internet users, today the number of internet users globally have increased to 5.3 billion people who have access to connectivity.¹ With this significant growth of internet adoption, our world also has gone through rapid efforts for digital transformation as evidently seen through the digitalization of identities, the pandemic's shift to e-learnings, to the use of Web3 technologies to push for transparency. Our world has undeniably become interconnected and the role of digital technologies to support our livelihood is further strengthened.

The Power and Potential of the Most Connected Generation

At the forefront of this digital advancement, is the world's most connected generation: young people. Today, 75 per cent of people aged between 15 and 24 are users of the internet², making them a generation of digital natives. Uniquely, at least 25% of today's 8 billion population are made up of children under the age of 14 who never experienced life before the internet existed³, while 1.2 billion of the world's young people in general have grown up through the internet advancement era. As digital natives, the experience and relationship between young people of today and digital technologies are unique in comparison to generations before them – such as Generation X, who most likely had to learn to navigate the internet and technology beyond their youth. This specific experience naturally makes young people of today both at leverage and at risk.

Growing up with the background of digital advancements has enabled young people to have competitive advantages in adopting and utilizing technologies to pursue education, employment, and aspirations. Young people of today often turn to digital learning opportunities to strengthen their digital skills. Youth-led grassroots movements have relied on social media and online messaging platforms to mobilize actions and advocacies for pertinent issues, such as the climate crisis. Around the world, with open source, blockchain, virtual reality, and other frontier technologies young people have risen to the challenge of creating innovative solutions that could contribute to sustainable development goals efforts.

The competitive advantage young people have as a generation of digital natives is not only making young people users of technologies but also drivers and inventors of technologies. When developing new features and products, technology companies look to young people as young people of today significantly hold the power of shaping the infrastructure influence. It is noted that young people significantly influence, by 63%, how the world receives and consumes news⁴

¹ [Global Connectivity Report 2022](#), ITU (2022)

² [Global Connectivity Report 2022](#), ITU (2022)

³ [World Population Data Dashboard](#), UNFPA (2023)

⁴ [Trust Barometer Special Report: The New Cascade of Influence](#), Edelman (2022)

today. The significance of young people’s power, potential, and influence on technologies have rightly made young people key stakeholders of digital development.

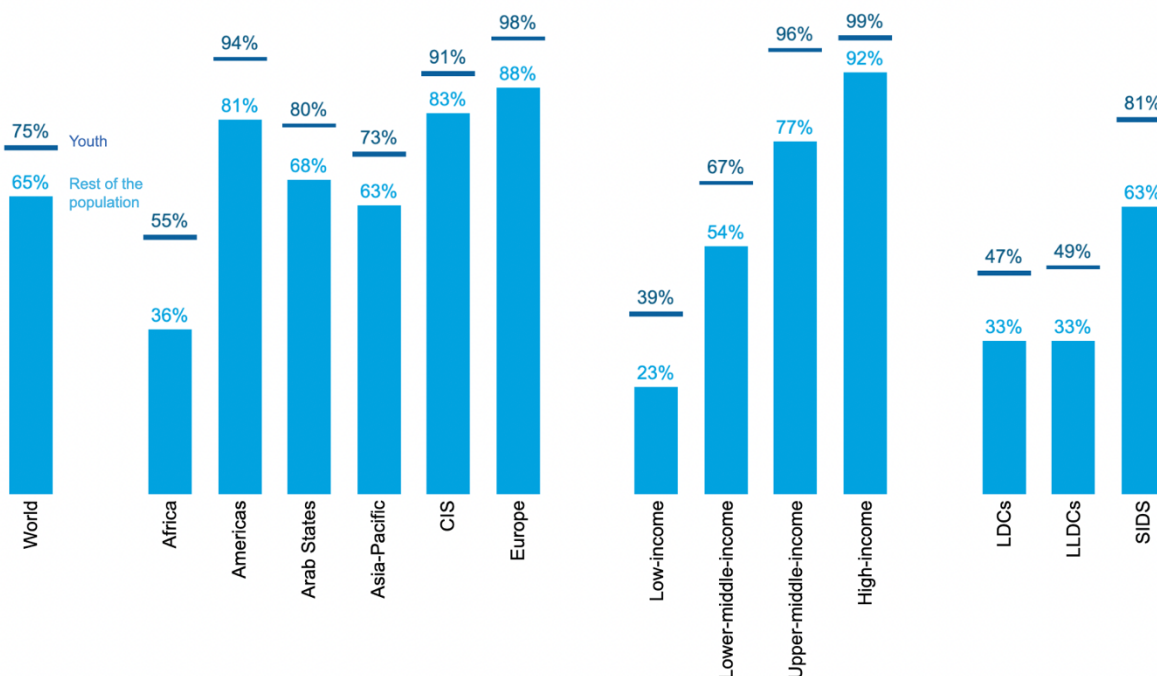
Hindering Barriers

However, despite the leverages that young people hold in the digital era, young people are not yet free from challenges, barriers, and harm:

Structural barriers

Despite being the most connected generation, intra-generational inequality still persists. While young people in middle-income countries drive the digital transformation, accessibility and affordability remain key constraints in low-income countries⁵.

Percentage of individuals using the Internet by age group, 2022



ITU Global Connectivity Report 2022

Beyond access, competence in navigating digital aspect is equally important as highlighted by the UNESCO Global Framework on Digital Literacy⁶. The framework highlighted the need for comprehensive literacy that includes competency not only in digital information literacy, but also competency in the aspect of safety and problem solving through digital technologies.

⁵ [Global Connectivity Report 2022](#), ITU (2022)

⁶ [Global Framework on Digital Literacy](#), UNESCO (2018)

Evidently, many young people are still lacking the opportunity to learn comprehensive digital literacy through their education system, in particular the competence of being able to fight misinformation, protect data, privacy, and wellbeing in online space. In a recent Amnesty International youth survey, 93% of respondents noted they have encountered misinformation and 86% respondent also have experienced blocking users in response to content they would not want to be exposed to⁷.

The gap in comprehensive and quality digital literacy and skills have also hindered young people who are often left behind to maximize their contribution to technology development, as well as hindered youth in leveraging from digital opportunities and innovation.

Lack of Protection of Human Rights Online

In 2023, over 80,000 young people from around the world participated in the U-Report survey on digital future. According to the findings, access for everyone remains the top concern for young people, however control of data and information (21%) and protection of human rights online (15%) are two other priority issues⁸ that young U-Reporters highlighted. The harm and risks that young people and children experience in the digital world as rights holders are as real as the harm and risks experienced offline. The Global Protection of Young People in Civic Space⁹ noted 78% of the survey respondents reported having experienced some form of digital threats, 18% have also reported they experienced them constantly.



U-Report on Digital Future 2023

Findings from UNDP's regional survey¹⁰ also highlighted the alarming threats of harmful contents online, young activists expressed that fake news (85%) and extremists' content online (73%) are the top two challenges that they face when they participate and engage online.

⁷ [Children and Youth Social Media Survey](#), Amnesty International (2023)

⁸ [Designed by youth: the architects of our digital future](#), UNICEF Innovation (2023)

⁹ [If I Disappear Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space](#), United Nations (2021)

¹⁰ [Civic Participation of Youth in the Digital World](#), UNDP (2021)

Young people's concerns over the digital future as well as the risks that they face also varies according to their diverse and intersectional lived identities. 23% of non-binary U-Reporters noted that the most important issue for the future of digital technology is to not restrict their opportunities¹¹, while a young female reporter noted that *"It worries me that technology will be replacing humans."* (Female U-Reporter, Indonesia, 17).

Exclusion of Youth in Policies and Processes

Moreover, in addition to structural barriers and lack of human-rights protection online, the policies and programmes on digital technology often exclude young people and children. It is noted that to begin with, young people are often traditionally excluded in policymaking processes. While nearly half of the world's population is under 30, only 2.6% of parliamentarians are under the age of 30¹². Despite the fact that young people are the most connected generation, current digital policies too frequently fail to take young people's perspectives and demands into consideration and young people have regularly voiced their concern over the continuous exclusion and lack of meaningful representation. For example, in a global survey of 250 adolescents, some have specifically highlighted that youth were often consulted but were not considered to be decision-makers in the process of shaping AI technologies and policies¹³. Moreover, in a broader ICT regulation context, only 16% out of 134 countries¹⁴ have separate regulatory authority for issues related to the internet in their country and 5.1% of 169 countries¹⁵ reported that informal coordination is still the mechanisms of collaboration with the ICT regulator.

¹¹ [Designed by youth: the architects of our digital future](#), UNICEF Innovation (2023)

¹² [Be Seen Be Heard: Understanding Young People's Political Participation](#), The Body Shop and Office of The Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth (2022)

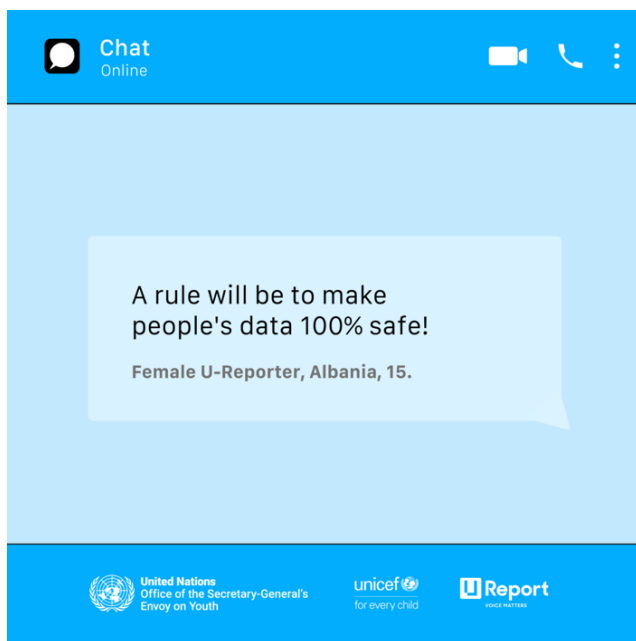
¹³ [Adolescent Perspectives on Artificial Intelligence](#), UNICEF (2021)

¹⁴ [ITU Data Hub: Governance framework - Internet-related issues](#), ITU (2023)

¹⁵ [ITU Data Hub: Governance framework - Internet-related issues](#), ITU (2023)

Opportunities and Recommendations

Rethinking the Digital Future requires Partnership with Digital Natives



When asked about the one most important rule that young people hope to have to help shape their digital future, young people highlighted the rule on data protection is one of the key priorities, along with AI governance. However, out of the nearly 80,000 respondents of the U-Report survey, only 3 out of 10 feel they have much control about the digital future.¹⁶

This highlights the reality that young people continue to have critical concern about technology and feel left out of the process to shape the digital future.

U-Report on Digital Future 2023

The Global Digital Compact is an opportunity to set standard of key principles in developing and implementing rights-respecting digital solutions. More importantly, the Global Digital Compact is a key opportunity to develop a unifying normative framework for digital development centered in inclusivity, equity, and accountability which can be applied by all Compact members regardless of the size, nature or location of the organization.

Building on the many recommendations young people have led, developed, and presented on the topic of digital development and the future of technology across all topics from connectivity¹⁷ and digital future¹⁸, Artificial Intelligence¹⁹, online protection²⁰, skills and education²¹, equality²², to environment²³ through various UN processes, as well as the recommendations and ideas young people have voiced through their work on the ground, the global digital compact should help

¹⁶ [Designed by youth: the architects of our digital future](#), UNICEF Innovation (2023)

¹⁷ [IGF Youth Message](#), Internet Governance Forum (2022)

¹⁸ [My Digital Future, Generation Connect Youth Call to Action](#), ITU (2022)

¹⁹ [Multistakeholder AI development: 10 building blocks for inclusive policy design](#), UNESCO, i4Policy (2022)

²⁰ [If I Disappear Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space](#), United Nations (2021)

²¹ [Transforming Education Summit Youth Declaration](#), United Nations (2022)

²² [Generation Equality Action Coalition](#), Generation Equality Forum (2021)

²³ [COP27 Global Youth Statement – Declaration for Climate Justice](#), YOUNGO (2022)

guide the policymaking process and development and/or innovation technological solutions by ensuring:

RECOMMENDATION 1

“Human rights as a non-negotiable aspect must be respected, protected, and remain at the center of all digital developments.”

- As digital development rapidly evolves, the threat against human rights also significantly increases. Development of technology and innovation without taking human rights into account will undoubtedly widen inequality and set back united efforts to bring the world together. It is therefore important for the Global Digital Compact to acknowledge human rights as a non-negotiable aspect of digital development, specifically by:

Strengthening Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA).

- Foster rights-respecting technologies by developing a standard of key principles for internet governance and digital technology regulations to uphold human rights and their deliberate protection and enable all stakeholder of technologies to be safe, protected, and empowered.

Ensuring the implementation of the Do No Harm principle.

- Foster commitments across all stakeholders to technologies that are free from bias and inequalities, including but not limited to, bias and discrimination based on based on age, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, visible and invisible disability.
- Host regular multistakeholder consultations, in particular with diverse groups of young people, to understand the trends of threats against human rights that appear in online civic spaces.

Upholding justice.

- Foster commitments across stakeholders to uphold justice and equality by thoroughly and impartially investigate threats and acts of intimidation and/or violation against human rights online, including hate speech and online discrimination.

Promoting intentional technological intervention.

- Foster the culture of being intentional in the process of technological developments to ensure all technological products and digital developments can truly serve a positive purpose for people and planet, aligned with the principles of responsible production and consumption.

RECOMMENDATION 2

“Inclusive and Meaningful Engagement of all Stakeholders, in particular Young People must be ensured.”

- Noting the significance of young people as key stakeholders of technology and their role as present and future leaders in digital development, the Global Digital Compact should aim to mainstream meaningful youth engagement principles²⁴ in both the Compact development process as well as the implementation of the Compact principles and framework:

Principles of meaningful youth engagement

Institutionally mandated	Rights-based	Safe	Designated	
	Resourced	Transparent	Accessible	Voluntary
Informative	Reciprocal accountability	Diversity/inclusion	Youth as partners	

- **Institutionally mandated:** Formally recognized the institutional responsibility of UN as leading institution to engage young people in its work on technology and digital development through official modalities.
- **Rights-based and safe:** Ensuring young people are recognized and informed as right holders as well as ensuring education of their rights and protection both online and offline are accessible.
- **Designated:** Reserved seats for diverse youth representation as key stakeholders at all levels of engagement
- **Resourced:** Recognizing youth engagement and participation should not be burdened to youth as rightsholders and committing to provide adequate resources to enable meaningful youth participations
- **Transparent, accessible, and voluntary:** Engagement opportunities for young people should be made available in transparent, accessible, and voluntary manners.

²⁴ [Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 3: Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policymaking and Decision-making Processes](#), United Nations (2023)

- Expressions of interest, should be available in local languages and accessible to marginalized youth, including young people with disabilities.
- **Informative:** Young people should be well informed on the roles, processes, and responsibilities of their participation and engagement
 - **Reciprocal accountability:** Young people should have the opportunity to give and receive feedback in a way that is safe and transparent
 - **Diversity and inclusion:** Ensure inclusiveness, pay attention to gender balance and engage youth who are traditionally underserved.
 - **Youth as partners:** Support young people’s leadership by facilitating opportunities for decision-making in all stages of programs and initiatives. This includes working with adolescent and youth-led organisations as a core partner at every level, ensuring that these roles are clearly defined, and young people are adequately supported in every way to ensure that they can influence decisions.
- Following from the recommendations put forth in the policy brief on Meaningful Youth Engagement, the Global Digital Compact should consider how it can mainstream the implementation of these principles, to serve as one strong example of how young people can be meaningfully integrated into multilateral decision-making processes in the digital realm. In this way, the establishment of the Compact can serve as a key connector in demonstrating what best practice for meaningful youth engagement looks like in the context of the UN’s intergovernmental processes and its vast work on digital technology and innovation.
 - Through the establishment of UN Youth Office and the system-wide implementation of UN Youth Strategy, Youth2030²⁵, the Office of the UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology should leverage on “One UN” approach to foster the UN’s institutional commitment to mainstream meaningful youth engagement in supporting the Global Digital Compact’s development process and implementation. Including by exploring different modalities of youth meaningful participation, such as establishing an empowered youth councils and advisories, as well as establishing and/or supporting existing youth-led thematic coalitions for technologies (such as youth-led coalition for digital safety, AI, and human rights online).
 - To further align with the UN Secretary-General’s Policy Brief on Meaningful Youth Engagement²⁶, the Global Digital Compact should support the recommendation to establish a standing United Nations Youth Townhall as one of the key mechanisms for youth to contribute the development and implementation of the Global Digital Compact. More importantly, the Digital Compact should also aim to ensure accessibility is available

²⁵ [UN Youth Strategy, Youth2030](#), United Nations (2018)

²⁶ [Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 3: Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policymaking and Decision-making Processes](#), United Nations (2023)

in all engagements that young people are taking part in, especially in regard to ensuring disability inclusion and language translations available.

- Lastly, the Global Digital Compact should also leverage on ongoing joint collaboration of UN partners, such as the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, UNICEF Innovation, ITU, UNESCO, OHCHR, UN Innovation Network, and all relevant UN partners to foster a collaborative approach in supporting young people's participation of the Global Digital Compact implementation. Moreover, the UN interagency work on the intersection of youth and technology, such as Giga²⁷, Protection through Online Protection (POP)²⁸ initiative, U-Report²⁹, Partner2Connect³⁰, Generation Connect³¹, Generation Equality Action Coalition on Technology³², and others should be encouraged to be further expanded and to build on synergies. Advocacy for interagency and multistakeholder collaborations in and with the UN can be further strengthened to encourage impactful partnerships for digital future that could positively contribute to the Digital Compact implementation.

RECOMMENDATION 3

“Adequate resources to empower young people as equal partners of digital development must be secured.”

- When empowered and equipped with resources and support, the young generation of today presents the untapped potential of 1.2 billion changemakers that can help bring positive and impactful contribution digital technology.
- However, it is imperative that the critical gaps in digital literacy, persisting gender digital divide, and inadequate youth representation in technology policies and governance are addressed. The Digital Compact presents a unique opportunity to mobilize joint action across stakeholders to address these challenges by:
 - Ensuring resources to enable young people's access to meaningful connectivity and technological infrastructure; quality education on digital literacy and skills; and equal opportunities for every youth, especially traditionally marginalized young people as these three key components are fundamental to help accelerate

²⁷ [GIGA Initiative](#), UNICEF (2019)

²⁸ [Protection through Online Participation](#), ITU and Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence Against Children (2021)

²⁹ [U-Report Platform](#), UNICEF (2023)

³⁰ [Partner2Connect Coalition](#), ITU (2021)

³¹ [Generation Connect Initiative](#), ITU (2021)

³² [Generation Equality Action Coalition](#), Generation Equality Forum (2020)

youth engagement and co-create the digital future. Moreover, digital commons should be made accessible to young people in all their diversity to support young people's meaningful participation in the digital world.

- Mobilizing multistakeholder partnerships that leverage on unique strengths of partners across sectors to close the financing gaps that often hinder the availability of the resources above. More importantly, further encourage public-private partnership to be committed in joining forces to make adequate and earmarked funding for the engagement of young people available, so young people do not have financial barriers to participate in the decision-making process on shaping the digital future.
- Encouraging Member States to consider introducing quotas in relevant decision-making bodies with the aim of increasing youth participation in shaping national ICT regulations and policies to be inclusive, equal, and future-fit. The representation should have an adequate gender balance, and ensure the participation and inclusion of minority, indigenous and other underrepresented youth communities.

Way Forward

The Our Common Agenda recommendation to create a Global Digital Compact is not only a critical recommendation, but also notably a timely one. The multidimensional challenges of the world such as the threat to human rights and equality – to the triple planetary crisis, currently shape the direction of digital development into a road full of risks for present and future generations.

The Global Digital Compact's key strength lies on its ambition to foster meaningful and impactful collaboration across all stakeholders for a better state of technology in our upcoming future. As the world continues to navigate the best way to move forward through partnerships and collaborations, the digital natives of today are already putting their recommendations, commitments and ambitions forward to support this work. Engaging young people as equal partner is key to ensure the global ambition to have a better, safer, and free digital future for all.