unicef
for every child

CAPE TOWN CONSULTATION WORKSHOP REPORT

AI and Children in Africa

Office of Global Insight and Policy
Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Child Rights Policy Project
13-14 February 2020 | Cape Town, South Africa

Background

As part of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Child Rights Policy Project, UNICEF, in partnership with the Government of Finland, is hosting a series of workshops around the world to gain regional perspectives on AI systems and children. These conversations will help UNICEF develop a policy guidance on how to promote children's development in AI strategies and practices.

The third workshop was held in Cape Town, South Africa, on 13 and 14 February 2020, with participants from Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Tunisia and Uganda. A wide range of organizations was represented, including the Cyber Policy Centre, Digital Impact Alliance, Dimagi, Injini, JET Education Services, Kimetrica, Medic Mobile, Research ICT Africa, Kenyan ICT Authority, Namibian Ministry of ICT, National IT Authority Uganda, Rwanda Information Society Authority, World Wide Web Foundation, and academics from universities in Tanzania and South Africa.

The two-day workshop was opened by Kari Alanko, Ambassador of Finland to South Africa and Deepak Bhaskaran, Regional Advisor for UNICEF's Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office. The workshop participants were asked to describe the challenges to more child-friendly AI policies and practices and provide feedback on the draft UNICEF principles for AI and child rights, as detailed below. The agenda also included lightning presentations on digital and AI issues in Africa, as well as a panel discussion on the implementation of AI and ICT policies in the region. From the beginning, participants expressed a desire to learn more about regulatory frameworks, share lessons learned with one another, and discover new tools and strategies to help implement AI policies in their countries.

UNICEF is grateful for the active participation of the attendees and looks forward to continued efforts by key organizations to realize the potential of AI for children in Africa.

For more information, please:

- See the workshop agenda
- Read the workshop highlights
- Download the workshop presentations
- View the workshop photos
- Read reflections from participants on how to build child-friendly AI that empowers children in Africa

Challenges for child-friendly AI in Africa

Why are AI systems not more empowering and protective for children?

Government AI policies and strategies and companies' AI codes of conduct are not more ethical or child-focused (yet) because…

- Governments are still grappling to understand AI and its implications, particularly in relation to children's rights. In general, many policies talk about citizen's rights and not children's rights explicitly.
- Related policies and strategies are often drafted in isolation, without the inclusion of external stakeholders, such as, human rights groups, businesses, academia, etc. This lack of coordination prevents policymakers from seeing and understanding AI's impact on children from various viewpoints.
- There is a failure to operationalize policy and a tendency to see 'policy as text'. Further, there is a tension between the rapid pace of technology and the length of time that it takes to validate a policy – a "policy lag".
- Governments have competing priorities, including infrastructure, literacy, access to mobiles, etc. AI initiatives may receive limited funding due to these competing priorities. Additionally, if AI initiatives or strategies are established, some governments may fear their lack of sustainability for this reason.
- The private sector has a lack of incentives to be held accountable for children's data. It is believed that if the focus is on profit, then online child safety checks may not be a priority. Businesses will not be involved in policy development or regulation unless incentives are given to them to develop trustworthy solutions.

AI systems are not implemented in a more ethical or child-friendly way (yet) because…

- There is no agreement on the legal mechanisms to implement AI policies. Discussions need to include international frameworks and not just national policies.
- A bottom-up approach which accounts for the participation of young people is missing. It is important to engage with children in their own communities (e.g. local neighborhoods, household, and school) and generate awareness about the potential impact of AI on their lives.
- Children are not seen as an independent group. They are often considered vulnerable stakeholders, grouped as 'women and children'.
- Companies do not develop sufficient guidelines for children in the context of AI.
- There is no one-size-fits-all approach for Africa because it is such a diverse continent. Broad principles need to be adapted to local contexts.
- Foundational and complementary policies with clear enforcement mechanisms need to be put in place to address AI issues. This includes policies around data protection and digital services.

PARTICIPANTS DISCUSS THE CHALLENGES TO CHILD-FRIENDLY AI SYSTEMS

Policy recommendations for AI and children

The workshop group discussed the proposed AI for children policy recommendations of Protect, Provide, and Empower and responded to key questions in this context.

1. Are there laws or regulations in your country or company specifically relating to AI and children?

Of the countries represented in the workshop, participants noted that none of them currently have laws or regulations specifically relating to AI and children. While there are some laws that focus on data protection, many are poorly implemented. Some country examples mentioned by the group include the following:

In Namibia, the data protection and cybercrime laws explicitly mention children. In Nigeria, a data protection law has been in effect since 2019. However, it does not relate explicitly to AI. In Kenya, a data protection act was passed in November 2019, which includes two provisions about obtaining data from children. Notably, it states that parental consent is necessary to acquire this data. Additionally, Kenya established a data commissioner's office which issues guidelines and codes of practice concerning data protection certifications and standards. These guidelines, which have yet to be set-up, are intended to be sector specific (e.g. health, social protection). Furthermore, the country's crimes act addresses issues of digital security around children, but it is limited.

South Africa has the Protection of Private Information Act which aims to safeguard information processed by public and private bodies. Lastly, in Rwanda, a policy for children's online rights was recently approved. This was noted as a good starting point; however, regulation has not been achieved yet. The ministerial guidelines note that the online sphere should be protective of children. One area to strengthen is child protection and law enforcement in digital policies.

2. Are guidelines around AI and children a priority for your country, company, or organization? Why or why not?

While many countries and/or companies would like to say that guidelines around AI and children are a priority and that work is being done in this area, participants expressed that this is not always the case. This is partially due to competing priorities across the continent.

One of the challenges that was discussed was the immense cost and infrastructure needed to collect and analyze data at scale. In many cases, only Silicon Valley's tech giants can afford to undertake this task. As a result, there is not enough African control over how data is collected and shared, which can limit opportunities for AI innovation in Africa and lead to biases in the data.

An example of momentum that could be built upon was the Fourth Industrial Revolution roadmap in South Africa, which describes the importance of youth participation and the need to develop children's digital literacy skills. While it does not focus on AI and children, this roadmap could serve as a catalyst for future child-friendly AI initiatives and endeavors.

3. What are some examples of your country, company, or organization protecting, providing for, or empowering children around AI? Are there lessons learned or best practices that could be replicated?

Participants recommended that the best way to build awareness of AI risks, harms, and opportunities is through use cases. This can help demonstrate the responsibilities various stakeholders have across the AI ecosystem. This includes developers, teachers, and parents. In terms of knowledge dissemination for children, several channels were identified, including online platforms (e.g. YouTube) and schools. It was suggested that a role for large companies could be to help fund these awareness campaigns.

In Tunisia, civil society organizations provide several programs to teach young people about coding and digital literacy, but these programs tend to be urban based. This was found to be the case with similar programs in other African countries, thus exacerbating the digital divide.

4. What specific recommendations should be included in the policy guidance framework?

Recommendations that should be included in the policy guidance framework include:

- **Public-private partnerships:** There is a need for greater coordination between the private and public sectors to move AI initiatives forward.
- **AI for employability:** Young people are showing a growing interest in using online platforms to improve their skills. It is important to incentivize governments to create new jobs for skilled students. Additionally, job training should be better integrated in the educational landscape, as well as continuing education, including nighttime and weekend classes.
- **Problem-solving:** To avoid tech solutionism, a mechanism needs to be identified to aid governments and companies decide if AI can help solve development related problems. If so, where applicable, children need to be central to their design and testing.
- **Research:** There is a critical need to conduct more research on AI as the risks and opportunities are not yet fully understood, particularly in relation to children.

Next steps

UNICEF will host more workshops to gain other regional perspectives on AI and children's issues. Through this consultative process we will develop a draft policy guidance, to be released in August 2020. If you are interested in getting involved in this project, please contact UNICEF at ai4children@unicef.org.

Cape Town Consultation Workshop Report

The Office of Global Insight and Policy serves as UNICEF's internal think-tank, investigating issues with implications for children, equipping the organization to more effectively shape the global discourse, and preparing it for the future by scanning the horizon for frontier issues and ways of working. With dedicated expertise in seven policy areas — digital technology, human capital, governance, the environment, society, markets, and finance — the Global Insight team assists the organization in interpreting, and engaging in, a rapidly changing world.

Office of Global Insight and Policy
UNICEF
3 UN Plaza, New York, NY 10017