

LEADING MINDS CONFERENCE 2025

The Future of Education in Africa

Outcomes report



Summary

Led by youth, with inputs from a range of experts, the UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti Leading Minds Conference held in Nairobi in November 2025 explored the many possible ways that education in Africa could evolve in coming decades. The conference built on the momentum of the [Decade of Education](#) declared by the African Union and [A Strategy for UNICEF's Contribution to Africa's Development Agendas](#). Participants included teachers, policymakers, the private sector, youth and civil society.

At the heart of the conversations were some important truths:

- [By 2050, about two out of every five children will live in Africa](#): their education will shape not just their lives and their continent, but the whole world.
- Children are not just recipients of education – they create it, they are its best critics, and they are ideally placed to make it fit for the future.
- Our current system is failing children. [Nine out of 10 learners in sub-Saharan Africa are unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10](#).
- Artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technology are here to stay. They bring risks and opportunities, and it is up to us to manage these.

The conversations were forward-looking. They used proven foresight methodologies to envisage different versions of education in Africa and drew on work done in the lead-up to the conference. Informed by data, research, evidence, experience and their own capacity to dream, participants imagined worlds where foundational learning was central, inclusion was a given, and AI and digital technologies supported teachers and learners in a context where risks were carefully managed.

Not all the futures imagined were positive. If business as usual continues, if systems do not equip learners with core competencies, if the harms to children online are not managed and insufficient numbers of teachers are left unsupported, then Africa will not reap the benefits of a demographic dividend.

Yet, overall, participants were techno-optimists and believed that every child in Africa in 2050 can benefit from an education system that equips them for twenty-first-century life. The conference led to concrete and bold calls to action aimed at transforming the future of education in Africa.

The challenge

Participants focused on four questions:

- What will it take to enhance human capital and capabilities in Africa?
- How can we strengthen the role of teachers in education?
- What will it take to ensure that education systems in Africa are equipping children with relevant skills for the future?
- What roles can AI and digital intelligence play in strengthening systems and in rolling out education in Africa?

Some opening provocations laid the groundwork for discussion.

Etleva Kadilli, Regional Director, Eastern and Southern Africa, UNICEF, reminded us why it was so important that this meeting took place in Nairobi. The demographic trend towards younger populations in Africa underlines the importance of reforming current systems and the huge opportunities that exist on the continent.

“Education systems should move from being a measure of performance to an indicator of strength – teaching kids not to go to AI but to work alongside it – shifting from teaching students to remember things, to training them to be critical thinkers.”

– **CRYSTAL**, Youth Foresight Fellow

Dr. Robert Gichuhi Ndegwa, Director of Policy, Partnership and East Africa Community Affairs at the Ministry of Education, spoke about the Government of Kenya’s investments in children. It’s not about bricks and mortar but rather about equipping young people with twenty-first-century skills.

Investing in young people involves:

- believing in their potential.
- equipping them.
- listening to them.
- giving them the tools they need.

Young people must be included in decisions and processes that affect them.

Foundational learning

Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili, Chairperson, School of Politics, Policy and Governance and President, Human Capital Africa, provoked us to share in her horror at the data. When children throughout Africa are spending years of their lives sitting in classrooms but not learning basic literacy and numeracy, then we are failing them. Just as we are failing all those who are out of school because the system does not address their disabilities, because the schools are too far from their homes, or we have not convinced their parents and communities that education matters.

“Our school systems mainly focus on academic intelligence; and it’s time for us to think of incorporating mental intelligence and creative intelligence – we must listen to children and youth in order to co-create an integrated system.”

– **SOPIA**, Youth Foresight Fellow

She spoke from personal experience, noting that in every school she sees enthusiastic children, but they are not learning. For her, the failure is at the political as well as technical level. We talk about allocating a certain percentage of budget to education, but budgeting for education doesn’t always equal investment in learning. Dr. Ezekwesili saw no tension between a focus on foundational learning and the need to spend money on training young people for jobs. We talk about training young people in higher-level skills for jobs, but how can that work if their foundational skills are weak? A plumber needs to use numbers to run a business. An electrician needs to be able to read the instructions to be able to install a socket. In her analysis, we are producing people that the labour market is rejecting.

Yet Dr. Ezekwesili also offered a path out of this situation. Drawing on models that she had seen working in other countries, she cited the need to make learning a political mission. When she meets heads of state in Africa, she greets them in their capacity as ‘Chief Learning Officers’ and asks each of them, “What did our children learn in school today?”

“Everyone needs to feel safe at school ... In Senegalese society a badjène gokh is a woman whose role is to advise young people, especially girls. A badjène gokh should be part of the team in schools taking care of the needs of the students.”

– **MOUSTAPHA**, Youth Foresight Fellow

In light of these presentations, and subsequent discussions, participants agreed on the importance of foundational learning. Beyond basic literacy and numeracy, they insisted that our education system needs to equip young people with social-behavioural skills and digital literacy. Critical thinking, contextualization of learning and capacity-building for teachers were concepts

that came up in discussion repeatedly, as did a recognition of structural barriers and cultural norms that hinder access, especially for girls.

It was agreed that education cannot be reduced to schooling. Foundational learning requires investment in the capacity to learn, not just physical infrastructure. There was consensus on the need to reimagine learning as a social process that builds curiosity, empathy and creativity from early childhood.

Digital education and AI

We are already living in the age of AI and digital technology.

Research shows that being online can be a risky business, especially for children and young people: as internet use in the population increases, so does exposure to harm. The pivotal point at which exposure accelerates is when approximately 50 per cent of a country's population have access to the internet. Many African countries find themselves at, or close to, that point and can learn from the failures of high-income countries that reached it earlier.

Not all online risks lead to harm. Taking risks is an important part of learning. What an adult sees as a threat, children might see as an opportunity. What adults see as safe, young people might think of as restrictive.

Daniel Kardefelt Winther, Research Manager, Digital Engagement and Protection, UNICEF Innocenti, presented findings from extensive research conducted by UNICEF Innocenti and partners over recent years. A helpful framework outlined four aspects to consider:

- Content – what children see. This might include exposure to violent, sexual or misleading content.
- Contact – who children interact with. Peers, family members and strangers can harm children online and in person.
- Conduct – what children do themselves. This might include sharing harmful content or bullying.
- Contract – how data is used. Commercial systems might use children's data, often without their knowledge and consent, in ways that undermine their privacy.

Many of the issues we see online are not new problems: violence, discrimination and inequalities manifest and are amplified in digital spaces. We can't address digital safety as simply a problem of technology, nor can we ignore the fact that while technology companies may not cause harm

themselves, they sometimes enable it. For example, most cases of online sexual abuse are linked to social media platforms. This raises questions about the way we hold companies accountable.

Research shows the myriad benefits that come with advances in digital technology. Teaching can be tailored to each learner's abilities, learning materials can be quickly and affordably adapted to local contexts, teachers can be supported on routine tasks, and AI can make learning fun. We should also explore the ways that AI can overcome some of the drawbacks of existing education systems: in research undertaken by the UNICEF Innocenti Youth Foresight Fellows in the lead-up to the conference, it was noted that AI agents can be easier to approach and communicate with than teachers. Some learners said that they would rather not risk a teacher reproaching them for asking a 'silly' or 'unnecessary' question. Examples from Sudan showed how digital tools can help in humanitarian settings, including when schools are shut down.

It was agreed that teachers need training on how to integrate AI into the learning experience, and that they should see it as an aid, not as competition. Young people want to see AI embedded in the curriculum, while acknowledging the importance of avoiding a culture of overreliance on technology. Learners must build skills in critical thinking, learn to identify misinformation and be supported to stay safe online.

"I envision a future where children can have solar panel-equipped iPads in their backpacks – so electricity and network don't become an issue."

– **NATALIO**, Youth Foresight Fellow

The role of the private sector was extensively discussed. AI is not just a technology – it is a business model. Participants noted that big tech companies are harnessing the best skills on the continent; they should be held accountable for the safety of their tools and platforms, while contributing to educating the public on how to use AI optimally. Companies are under pressure to move fast and feel that developing products safely might slow them down: they need to be rewarded, not penalized, for making safe products. Data was considered crucial. It's important to know more about how data is being used and how government is making businesses comply with data privacy and protection regulations. Examples were given of instances where partnerships with the private sector can make internet access free for learners so that there is no economic burden for parents.

Consideration was also given to the fact that AI wasn't built with Africa as the focus. There is a need to build AI that is suited to agricultural economies, for example, or to those that are still struggling to provide their citizens with basic amenities such as schools and hospitals. The need for a stable electricity supply was also acknowledged. AI and digital education can, and must,

meet the needs of those with disabilities such as vision and hearing impairments. It can also respond to the fact that everyone learns differently: some people are visual learners, others need hands-on experience.

Inclusion and resilience

From the Sustainable Development Goals to the [African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child](#), the need for education to be inclusive and equitable has been recognized as a priority.

"[The] digital divide and inequality gap ... came up from my research workshops. Students from rural areas and underrepresented communities might lag behind when it comes to building skills related to AI for the future of work. I urge educators, policymakers and industry leaders to invest in equitable and safe AI education for every learner."

– **Beatrice**, Youth Foresight Fellow

Throughout the Leading Minds conference, sessions emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence, solidarity and equality of access. Participants highlighted the role of indigenous wisdom and competency-based curricula in fostering resilience. Discussions underscored the need for practice-based learning and parental support, and the youth fellows advocated for inclusive spaces that prevent bullying and promote empathy.

Participants shared their experiences and acknowledged the need to think broadly, taking into account the needs of children with disabilities, girls, the poor and refugees. Thinking about how to make education systems meet the requirements of all children also necessitates consideration of children's need to learn in their own languages and how to reach those who currently have low learning outcomes or are out of school.

Teachers told of their own experience and the way they had learned on the job, developed creative solutions, benefited from training and taken the initiative to train other teachers, parents and community members. The need for all learners to feel safe was emphasized, and this encompassed policies for safeguarding as well as practical considerations such as the importance of adequate sanitation in schools, including facilities for girls to manage their menstrual hygiene needs and wheelchair-accessible toilets.

"Curriculums and educational policies often lack representations of the needs, realities and aspirations of students, teachers and facilitators coming from marginalized communities."

– **SAMPADA**, Youth Foresight Fellow

Many countries in Africa now have good policies as regards the inclusion of children with disabilities into education systems, including in mainstream schools, however there is often a gap between policy and practice. Nonetheless, trainings do happen and efforts are being made by governments to address challenges and provide tools, such as digital devices, adapted devices, guidance for teachers and information on basic infrastructure adaptations.

Many of the education systems are based on a Western construct, and localization was highlighted as a key element for success. Advocacy with community and school leaders was also seen as an important element of social behaviour change. In addition, there is still much to be done in order to tackle inclusion issues across the board.

The futures we create

During the Leading Minds conference, the youth fellows guided participants through a range of activities based on well-established foresight methodologies. Imagining different types of futures – possible, probable and preferred – is a powerful way of identifying what we do, and don't, want to see happen. Once we know where we want to head, we can plan our pathway and the actions we need to take to get there. Equally, visions of just how badly things could turn out give a compelling and urgent indication of the risks we need to guard against.

Two methodologies were used in the lead-up to, and during, the 2025 Leading Minds conference. The results of this work are the subject of more detailed reports.

Young Visionaries: Child Rights Youth Foresight Report on Education 2025

The Young Visionaries: Child Rights Youth Foresight Report on Education 2025 is a youth-led exploration of how education could and should evolve to meet the opportunities and

risks of tomorrow. Fifteen Youth Foresight Fellows designed and led national research projects, organizing over 40 workshops and engaging more than 800 children and young people across

15 countries. Using foresight tools, they identified signals of change, imagined preferred futures, and created space for honest conversations about hopes, fears and possibilities.

A recurring message was that children and young people are yearning for more opportunities and agency to shape their learning journeys. They highlighted some of the changes they would like to see, including taking charge of the narrative.

Taking charge of the narrative

Working in small groups during the conference, participants developed metaphors to describe the worst aspects of the current education system and the classroom experience. They came back to this exercise a few days later to rewrite the script and define more hopeful futures.

The narratives changed from these

School is like a prison ...
Schools are a waste of time ...
Digital connection is bad for youth ...
Education is a Western thing ...
Schools are not safe ...
Teaching is undervalued ...
Someday someone will fix it ...
A child is an envelope to be filled with knowledge ...

to these

... Schools are like gardens.
... Schools are peace labs.
... Schools are nests where children grow.
... Education doesn't need a passport in a borderless world.
... Education is the light and hope for the future.
... A child is an envelope full of creativity to be explored.
... Education is learning and learning is education.

Headlines of the future

Groups were assigned the task of imagining the news stories of the future under a range of situations. They came up with witty and thought-provoking 'front-page headlines', following in the footsteps of virtual networks of youth foresight practitioners who had undertaken a similar exercise in previous weeks. Participants voted on which of the scenarios they found most probable, which were the most worrying and which gave them the most hope.

The scariest prospect for most people was one in which communication was impossible, teachers scarce and jobs unavailable. But many scenarios gave participants hope, among them a vision of an inclusive future where AI supported human goodwill to create a world where language was no longer a barrier.

“The kids’ ideas were inspired by their imagination of the future. They envisioned classrooms that could dynamically adapt to different subjects and activities – almost like changing weather patterns – by adjusting lighting, greenery and other environmental elements. For instance, when studying history, the classroom might incorporate sounds and sensory details to bring the past to life. I find this concept both innovative and inspiring.”

– Ayoub, Youth Foresight Fellow

Interactive radar

The interactive radar shows signals of change identified by young people that could greatly impact the future of education in Africa.

In 2025, 15 UNICEF Innocenti Youth Foresight Fellows from around the world identified emerging issues they believe could transform how we learn, teach and grow. Their collective

insights reveal signals of change across seven vital education domains, explored through Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, and Political and Legal (STEEP) perspectives.

Calls to action

The future is not predestined. Our actions will determine how education in Africa can change to meet the needs of learners, and of the continent as a whole. Participants at Leading Minds identified actions that each of us can take now to make sure those futures are optimal.

Policymakers

- Become a champion for basic literacy and numeracy for every learner.
- Ensure good governance and data privacy keep children safe online.
- Support capacity-building for teachers.
- Embed implementation research into large-scale education programmes and teacher training, and adjust programmes in real time in light of what is learned.

Teachers

- Share your wealth of experience in successfully teaching children to reach expected foundational learning levels.
- Exchange ideas about proven ways to support children with disabilities learn in mainstream education.
- Learn from students about the ways they are already using AI and digital technology.
- Consider digital technologies as ways to contextualize materials and address workload.

Business leaders

- Build and scale up safe digital and AI tools that make learning fun.
- Put protection and equity at the heart of development – don't create tools then look for ways to make them safe.
- Identify the skills needed for your twenty-first-century workforce and support systems that help learners gain these skills.

Parents and communities

- Insist on basic literacy and numeracy for all.
- Embrace digital technologies and AI, rather than fearing them, and learn with children about the possibilities they offer.
- Stay vigilant and take seriously the risks to children online. Hold policymakers and developers accountable for addressing them.

Learners

- Continue to use AI and digital tools to build foundational and higher-level skills, inside and outside the classroom.
- Imagine, and demand, education systems for the twenty-first century and beyond.

Concluding thoughts and next steps

The work of Leading Minds does not stop here. These discussions have contributed to a vision for Africa that strengthens and builds on the existing education system. It draws on the experience of what is already working, using solid data to drive considered changes. What is clear is that we don't have enough schools and enough teachers to meet the needs of the growing and diverse cohort of African children and young people, so we need to use technology thoughtfully to fill these gaps.

"We need education systems that start career exploration theory in middle school, help students discover their passions, and choose paths that align with their dreams and passions. Because I guess success is all about loving what you do and doing what you love."

– Ifaliana, Youth Foresight Fellow

We also need to look beyond the school setting, taking into account the roles of parents, communities and politicians, and exploring the potential of informal settings where children can learn through technologies such as video games.

In the hands of young leaders, the education systems of the future will see literacy and numeracy firmly established and complemented by social-behavioural skills and digital literacy. Twenty-first-century competencies will equip young people to enter the workforce, driving their own fulfilment and the economic success of the continent. Digital technologies and AI will support the work of teachers and parents in an environment where risks are managed and learning is fun.

The findings reported here will inform the implementation of the [Strategy for UNICEF's Contribution to Africa's Development](#). UNICEF Innocenti Youth Foresight Fellows will leverage their networks to discuss and take forward the recommendations.

This is a conversation that will not stop. We will continue to actively shape the futures of education in Africa, using evidence and foresight, in a spirit of optimism and confidence.

Acknowledgements

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About us

UNICEF, the United Nations agency for children, works to protect the rights of every child, everywhere, especially the most disadvantaged children and in the toughest places to reach. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive, and fulfil their potential.

UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti accelerates progress for children by working to ensure that policies and programming are informed by high-quality evidence. As the global custodian of child-related official statistics, it works closely with governments and partners to strengthen national statistical systems. Through world-leading data, research and foresight, it underpins UNICEF's global leadership on children's rights and serves as the organization's hub for setting strategy and monitoring programmes. With the active engagement of young people and other partners, it supports advocacy and dialogue aimed at improving the lives of children everywhere.

UNICEF Innocenti provides, for every child, answers to their most pressing concerns.

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UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti
Via degli Alfani, 58
50121, Florence, Italy

Web: unicef.org/innocenti

Email: innocenti@unicef.org

Social media: @UNICEFINnocenti on [Bluesky](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [YouTube](#)

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