The Convention was sufficiently inspiring and all-encompassing that in merely two decades from its adoption it has been ratified by all but two of the world’s nations, becoming the most widely supported human rights treaty in history. Its two Optional Protocols, both adopted by the United Nations in 2000, sought to further strengthen the rights of children by specifying provisions to protect them from involvement in situations of armed conflict and from trafficking, slavery, prostitution and pornography.

**Adolescent participation in key international forums has increased steadily in recent decades**

Prior to the adoption of the Convention, adolescents’ participation in international development and human rights forums was almost non-existent. The 1990 World Summit for Children provided an opportunity to dispel the notion that adolescents are incapable of making a contribution to the international development agenda in general on issues related to them specifically. At this global event, adolescents made their voices and opinions heard on issues affecting them and were instrumental in the formulation of the final outcome document.

This participatory process was replicated during the 2002 UN General Assembly Special Session on Children, which brought more than 400 adolescents from 150 countries to New York to exchange experiences and make demands of world leaders in a three-day Children’s Forum. Five years later, adolescents participated in the follow-up to the Special Session, and they also made presentations at the commemorative event celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Convention on 20 November 2009.

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**Digital natives and the three divides to bridge**

*by John Palfrey, Urs Gasser and Colin Maclay of the Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University, and Gerrit Beger of UNICEF.*

While we use the term ‘digital natives’ to describe the generation born after roughly 1980, not all young people fall into this category. Digital natives share a common global culture defined less by age than by their experience growing up immersed in digital technology. This experience affects their interaction with information technologies and information itself, as well as the ways they relate with one another, other people and institutions.

Reaping the benefits of digital tools, therefore, means more than just being born in a certain period or having access to a laptop. For adolescents to realize the full promise of new technologies, three divides must be bridged. The first has to do with basic access to these technologies and related infrastructure, such as electricity; the second involves the skills needed to use the technologies once they become accessible; and the third stems from our limited understanding of how young people navigate the online world. Each of these divides exists in every society, but their effects are felt most acutely in the developing world.

Over the past decade, access to the Internet, mobile devices and digital media has increased at a rapid rate. Approximately a quarter of the world’s 6.8 billion people have access to the Internet, and 86 per cent can connect to the world’s communications networks through mobile devices. Yet such access remains highly inequitable, with rates in Africa, for instance, far below those in Europe.

There are signs that committed investment may shrink the access divide. For example, Botswana is developing one of the highest rates of technology penetration in sub-Saharan Africa; the Communications Ministry stated in 2010 that there was “over 100 per cent” mobile coverage (though broadband household Internet access continues to lag behind). Meanwhile, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda has committed to making his country a leader in economic development through investment in new technologies and Internet infrastructure.

While necessary, such efforts are not sufficient. There is also a participation gap between those with sophisticated skills in using digital media and those without. In the developing world, many youth rely on mobile devices rather than fixed line connections with faster speeds. Basic literacy is also an issue.

Digital literacy – the ability to navigate a digitally mediated world – further separates youth who are likely to benefit from digital technologies from those who are not. Young people who do not have access to the Internet at home or in schools — and who lack the support that comes from teachers and parents equipped with strong digital skills — will not develop the necessary social, learning and technical skill sets.
Over the past two to three decades, the international community has paid increasing attention to the particular needs of adolescents. This reflects a keener understanding of participation as a right of all children and especially of adolescents. It also underscores a growing acknowledgement that advances in health and education achieved in early and middle childhood must be consolidated in adolescence so as to effectively address the intergenerational transmission of poverty and inequality. In part, this sharper focus has been forced by the global challenges – such as the AIDS pandemic, massive global youth unemployment and underemployment, demographic shifts and climate change – that have emerged as major threats to the present and future for millions of adolescents and young people.

The world is now waking up to the central importance of the rights of adolescents – and to humanity’s need to harness the idealism, energy and potential of the emerging generation. But even existing international commitments will not be met unless there is a much greater concentration of resources, strategic planning and political will towards the cause of adolescent rights.

Adolescents are as worthy of care and protection as young children, and as worthy of consideration and participation as adults. Now is the moment for the world to recognize both what it owes to them and the singular dividends that investing in this age of opportunity can generate – for the adolescents themselves and for the societies in which they live.

for success in a wired global economy. Without the opportunity to become familiar with electronic media, adolescents may have trouble navigating social interactions in online communities or recognizing biased, unreliable information.

The third divide is the lack of knowledge about how young people use digital media across societies. In some countries – such as the United Kingdom, the United States and parts of East Asia – both quantitative and qualitative data exist about the ways in which young people use new technologies, and these data have begun to reveal how electronic media are changing practices among youth. Beyond basic information on access, however, such data are scarce in most parts of the world. One challenge is that youth technology practices have only recently become subjects of research, especially outside of a few parts of the world.

It is clear, however, that engagement with digital technologies is transforming learning, socializing and communication among youth who are able to access and use them. For these individuals, activities like content generation, remixing, collaboration and sharing are important aspects of daily life. Many of these activities are ‘friendship-driven’, serving to maintain relationships with people already known offline. Others are ‘interest-driven’, allowing youth to develop expertise in specialized skill sets such as animation or blogging. In either context, the casual, frequent use of new media contributes significantly to the development of both technological and social skills. Electronic media also provide an opportunity for intense, self-directed, interest-driven study.

The benefits of far-reaching digital technologies extend beyond learning to promoting creativity, entrepreneurship and activism. Adolescents and young people are using these technologies to express themselves through videos, audio recordings and games. They are creating inspiring political movements, watchdog groups and new modes of organizing that combine the online and the offline. As they become young adults, some of them are inventing new businesses and technologies that create jobs and opportunities. They teach one another as they build out into the global cyber environment.

Our challenge as a global society is to design and build online experiences for adolescents that help them seize the opportunities – while mitigating the challenges – of life that are partially mediated by digital technologies. “Our challenge as a global society is to design and build online experiences for adolescents and young people that help them seize the opportunities – while mitigating the challenges – of life that are partially mediated by digital technologies.”