Kim Ringmar Sylwander   Sonia Livingstone   July 31st, 2025

Recognising children's rights in the 20-year review of the World Summit on the Information Society

Twenty years on from the World Summit on the Information Society, the WSIS+20 review process is taking place this year, culminating in a High-Level Meeting of the UN General Assembly at the end of the year. Here, Kim R. Sylwander and Professor Sonia Livingstone of the LSE-based Digital Futures for Children centre detail some of the key concerns and recommendations of child rights experts with regards to the digital environment.

Recent decades have seen significant developments following the 2005 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Yet, from a child rights perspective, progress remains partial. WSIS's early recognition of young people as active digital participants was promising, but the rights of the child, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), were not integrated into its original agenda, and nor were children fully recognised as rights-holders.

The WSIS+20 High-Level Meeting of the UN General Assembly (to take place on 16–17 December 2025) will review the outcomes of 20 years' effort to shape "a people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society." A key input to the WSIS+20 Review Elements Paper, leading up to the outcomes document to be discussed in December, is the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD)'s Implementing World Summit on the Information Society Outcomes: A Twenty-Year Review. To inform this, the Digital Futures for Children (DFC) centre convened a global consultation of child rights experts on behalf of the CSTD.

Top five child rights concerns for the digital environment

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We need to move from a harm-based approach to a rights-based one. Children's rights are not about just safety, they're about dignity, agency, expression.

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– (Child rights expert at the DFC consultation)

The child rights consultation we hosted – including experts from ITU, UNICEF, UNESCO, UN Special rapporteurs, Committee on the Rights of the Child, Save the Children, Child Rights Connect Asia, Eurochild, Alana, Mtoto News and 5Rights Foundation – was framed by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General comment No. 25 on the digital environment. This is "the most comprehensive direction of travel for what good looks like for children," according to a child rights expert who participated in the DFC consultation.

Here we sum up the experts' top five recommendations:

1. **WSIS should recognise children as a distinct rights-holder group in digital governance discussions**, alongside women, persons with disabilities, and Indigenous Peoples, as befits their distinct legal status under the UNCRC. It should adopt a holistic approach to children's rights and seek to embed General comment No. 25 into digital governance frameworks.

2. Access remains profoundly unequal, both globally and within societies, often exacerbating existing inequalities. **Inequalities of access and inclusion must be rectified without placing children at risk** – globally, technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is rising, whether or not children themselves are internet users.

3. Children's rights are commonly violated in digital spaces, largely because digital products and services were not designed with children in mind. **Priority actions should require digital service providers to embed Child Rights by Design principles**, including privacy-by-default, safety-by-default, and ethical AI. This includes consulting children in product design, policy development, and data governance decisions that affect them and ensuring their voices are heard.

4. **These must be enforced through binding regulation, regular auditing, and remedies for rights violations** – including via Child Rights Impact Assessments and effective enforcement. Today's problems arise from the lack of enforceable frameworks, overreliance on voluntary corporate compliance, weak accountability, and missing child-specific safeguards.

5. The UN and other international agencies must remain independent of tech industry interests, and **rebalance global digital policy towards human rights, including children's**. Notably, children should

not be profiled or targeted for commercial purposes on the basis of a digital record of their actual or inferred characteristics, and digital surveillance of their lives should not become routine.

Looking towards the WSIS+20 meeting

The digital world is no longer optional for children, and digital environments are now primary sites of childhood. Children use, inhabit and are shaped by these environments in ways that require specific protections and active inclusion.

Despite decades of recognition under international law, children's rights continue to be inadequately reflected in global digital policy. This failure has tangible consequences: exploitative data practices, exclusion from decision-making, and environments that prioritise profit over protection. WSIS+20 presents a critical opportunity to rectify historical oversights.

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> *We've got the frameworks. What's missing is the political will and enforcement.*
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– *(Child rights expert at the DFC consultation)*

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> *The governance gap isn't just about gaps in law, it's a gap in accountability, especially for global tech firms operating across borders.*
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– *(Child rights expert at the DFC consultation)*

Complementing the inclusion of children's rights in the UN's Global Digital Compact, we were delighted to see that the Elements Paper includes a clear statement (para 46) that:

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> *Development of ICT applications and operation of services should respect the rights of children as well as their protection and well-being.*
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With further consultations leading up to December, it's vital to keep in mind that today's adults have the power to shape the digital world on behalf of children's present and all our futures. Ensuring that children's rights remain at the centre of the continued negotiations is therefore crucial.

This post gives the views of the authors and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Featured image: Photo by zhenzhong liu on Unsplash

About the author

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Dr Kim Ringmar Sylwander is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Digital Futures for Children centre. Her research centres on how children and youth navigate technologically mediated environments, including issues related to sexual consent in online contexts, sexualised and racialised hate and young people's consumption of pornography.

Sonia Livingstone

Sonia Livingstone OBE is Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. Taking a comparative, critical and contextual approach, her research examines how the changing conditions of mediation are reshaping everyday practices and possibilities for action. She has published twenty books on media audiences, media literacy

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