# ICTs and Violence against Children

## Thematic Expert Consultation
## Concept Note

## Context

The Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children (SRSG) is a high-profile global independent advocate for the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children.

The SRSG promotes the protection of children from violence as a human rights imperative, making use of mutually supportive strategies. These include advocacy; the promotion of international, regional and national consultations to advance progress, identify good practices and promote cross-fertilization of experience; the hosting of expert consultations; the development of thematic studies and information materials; and the organization of field missions.

Tackling emerging concerns in the area of violence against children, including opportunities and risks associated with information and communication technologies (ICTs), is one of the priorities identified by the SRSG for the years 2014-2015.

In order to build on the growing body of knowledge and experience, and to accelerate progress in children's online protection from violence, the SRSG will prepare a report on ICTs and violence against children. The report will be launched during the sixty-ninth Session of the General Assembly, in 2014.

Adopting a global perspective, this report will serve as both a source of information on the latest developments in this field, and an advocacy tool to promote coordinated action to protect children online and encourage safe access to online information.

The report is intended for use by legislators, policy makers, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and the corporate sector. It will also be of relevance for children and young people, teachers, researchers and others with an interest in the intersection of child rights and new technologies.

The report will be informed by significant developments at international, regional and national levels and its preparation includes an Expert Consultation, to be held in 9-10 June 2014, in San Jose, Costa Rica.

## The issues

ICTs have developed at an increasingly rapid rate over the last two decades.[1] They have had, and continue to have, a profound effect around the world, bringing with them enormous benefits and opportunities, most especially by facilitating access to the Internet. For children and young people, who are particularly adept at harnessing the potential of these technologies, they offer new means of experiencing creative processes, communication, socialization, entertainment and education. Indeed, technological advances have been so rapid that parents and caregivers often struggle to keep up with developments.

The benefits of ICTs and the Internet, the potential they offer children to become empowered global digital citizens, and the dividends for society of a digitally literate population come at a price. Many of the factors that attract young people to use ICTs to access the Internet – including the freedom and apparent anonymity of online activity, the eradication of geographical boundaries, and the ease of making online "friends" – can also be used by adults to abuse and exploit children and adolescents.

There is a growing awareness of the risks children face when they encounter harmful material online, including sexually explicit, violent, hateful or otherwise harmful content. Likewise, the production of child abuse images and the establishment of inappropriate contact with a view to grooming, harassing, exploiting or trafficking children are now common concerns for parents and caregivers, governments, law enforcement agencies, the media, NGOs working in the field of child protection, the corporate sector and, to a growing extent, children themselves.

And it is increasingly recognized that children are not always passive "victims": children's own agency is central to other phenomena such as "cyberbullying", online self-exposure and Internet "addiction" (often associated with gaming or online gambling).

The manner in which children and young people engage through these technologies is significantly different to that of older generations. Researchers observe that for children, the online/offline distinction is becoming ever less relevant. This being the case, if online threats are to be effectively addressed, adults must take care to avoid projecting their own online mindsets and habits onto children and young people.

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[1] An ITU publication from September 2013 states that, "[w]hile there are several definitions of ICT, all acknowledge that ICT is an umbrella term which includes any information and communication device or application and its content. Such a definition encompasses a wide range of access technologies, such as radio, television, satellites, mobile phones, fixed lines, computers, network hardware and software."

Serious as these issues may be, they should not precipitate what have been termed "moral panics or exaggerated anxieties".[2] Rather, they call for measured, coordinated responses and effective partnerships among a range of actors - including the corporate sector - based upon sound data and research. The more we know about how children of different ages and in different socio-economic, cultural and political contexts use ICTs and access the Internet, the better equipped we are to prevent and respond to the existing and emerging challenges, promoting the immense benefits of these technologies, while mitigating the associated risks.

## Objectives of the Expert Consultation

The Consultation will gather expertise from a number of partners in national governments, UN agencies, international and regional organizations, academia, independent children's rights institutions, civil society organizations, the media and the corporate sector. The consultation will be equally informed by the findings of surveys conducted with children and young people on opportunities and risks associated with the use of ICTs.

The Expert Consultation aims to support advocacy, national legislative and policy initiatives to strengthen protection of children from violence through new information and communication technologies, and to increase awareness, political support and global action for online child protection.

Starting with a reflection on the ways in which children use ICTs, participants will be invited to discuss the extent to which the concerns expressed by children, their wishes and needs are known, taken into account and properly addressed. An analysis of the opportunities and risks of ICTs from a children's rights perspective will be followed by a discussion about the way in which the normative and policy framework can effectively support the prevention and reporting of violence, the protection of children and the fight against impunity. Recognizing that the setting up and the implementation of an inclusive and safe digital agenda is a shared responsibility, the consultation will provide a platform for the various stakeholders to make concrete proposals for their involvement in this undertaking.

Building upon evidence and promising practices, the meeting is also designed to bridge efforts between international agencies, national governments, civil society organizations, research institutions, the corporate sector and other actors.

Specifically, the meeting will:
- Assess progress and reflect on key developments promoted by strategic partners, including UN agencies, international organizations, national governments, independent children's rights institutions, academia, civil society partners and the corporate sector on the prevention and elimination of violence against children through new information and communication technologies;
- Learn about initiatives which promote children's safety in the digital world, empower children in the use of internet and/or other information and communications

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[2] EU Kids Online (2009-11).

technologies, prevent abuse and exploitation, and strengthen the protection of children from online abuse;

- Identify knowledge gaps and factors that hinder the promotion of evidence-based policies and the mobilization of resources and advocacy to prevent and address violence against children through new information and communication technologies;
- Identify strategic recommendations to assist Member States and other stakeholders in strengthening children's empowerment and their protection from violence through new information and communication technologies, as well as in the further development of research in this area.

*Expected outcomes*

- The results of the meeting will be integrated in the SRSG thematic report, capturing promising national legislative and policy responses; most significant opportunities and risks, as well as recommendations for strengthening the protection and the agency of children in and through the ICTs.
- Conclusions and recommendations from the meeting will be included in the annual reports of the SRSG to the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council;
- Strategic partnerships and action will be promoted to leverage and further enhance progress made in this area and bring the agenda forward.

**COSTA RICA CONSULTATION**

**Main thematic clusters**

**I. Connected children: Who are they? What do they do? What do they need and want?**
- Trends, assumptions and perceptions
- Children agents of change
- Child victims – Risky behaviour
- Child offenders

**2. ICTs: Opportunities and Risks**
- Risks related to contact, content, conduct and commerce.
- Opportunities: Learning, socialising (including advocating and participating), leisure, getting help and helping (including access to child friendly materials, counselling and reporting mechanisms). Promotion of values (including anti-hate speech, fighting stereotypes) and positive experiences (children in hospitals, remote areas or otherwise isolated).

**3. Normative and Policy framework: Empowering and protecting children, fighting impunity**
- Children's rights and internet (off line-on line continuum)
- International and regional standards
- Challenges, lessons learnt and good practices

**4. Promoting shared responsibility**
- Governments
- Parliaments
- Ombudspersons
- Children
- Families and schools
- Corporate sector: ICTs-related, advertising, leisure (including gaming), producers of content
- Civil Society (including professional networks and research institutions)

**5. Connecting to a safe, inclusive and empowering Digital Agenda**
- Bringing stakeholders together
  - Share lessons learnt and good practices
  - Identify gaps and propose solutions
  - Identify, generate and use potential
  - Agree on priorities and capitalize on each partner's leverage
- Making things happen to promote a safe use of ICTs: propose a clear child-centred agenda, obtain support and aim at multiplying impact

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