Children's rights in relation to the digital environment

From Protection to Participation - a GSMA perspective

May 2019

Children's rights in relation to the digital environment

About the GSMA

The GSMA represents the interests of mobile operators worldwide, uniting more than 750 operators with over 350 companies in the broader mobile ecosystem, including handset and device makers, software companies, equipment providers and internet companies, as well as organisations in adjacent industry sectors.

Introduction

The GSMA welcomes the opportunity to share with the Committee on the Rights of the Child some of the experience and undertakings of the mobile operator community in supporting and promoting children's rights in the digital environment.

In the 30 years since the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), mobile technology has become an inherent part of family life, offering a world of benefits and new opportunities for young people and their parents, while also posing potential risks.

The GSMA has worked with its members on considerations relating to children and mobile technology for over 10 years, gathering and sharing learnings and good practice, and engaging with key external stakeholders – from governments and law enforcement, to civil society and academia – to achieve the best possible results for children.

Historically, much of our work has focused on *protection* - encouraging and enabling safe and responsible use of mobile services by young people, as well as collaborating to make mobile services hostile to those who wish to misuse technology to sexually exploit children.

Activities relating to mitigating risks and protecting children will always remain vitally important. They are the foundations which enable children – and their parents, carers and wider communities – to successfully harness the power of connectivity to realise the rich opportunities and benefits afforded by connectivity to enhance children's lives.

More recently, as the uses and applications of mobile technology have broadened across the world, the GSMA and its members have expanded their work to also consider the positive benefits that mobile technology can also introduce into the lives of children and their families.

From Protection to Participation: the full spectrum of fundamental child rights

By using the CRC as a lens through which to consider potential child rights impacts of digital services, including mobile technology, it is possible to understand better the many ways that digital connectivity can support a broader spectrum of child rights.

It is timely for all stakeholders to broaden our thinking about children's rights in a digital environment. Whilst sustained efforts around protection must and will continue, we should also

work actively to understand and use the digital tools available to us to improve the lives, well-being and outcomes of all children.

Mobile operators – often working closely with governments and expert partners – are actively engaging in activities which promote a range of child rights in the countries where they operate. The examples shared below, whilst representing only a fraction of the activities currently underway, do suggest the many ways in which technology, deployed correctly, can support fundamental child rights in today's connected society.

Right to education and digital literacy

Mobile technology can support children's education by enabling access to educational content and services online. For example,

- **Vodafone Foundation** instant network schools enable young refugees and teachers to access digital educational content and the internet www.vodafone.com/content/foundation/instant-network-schools.html
- **America Movil**'s Aprende programme is a digital platform where teachers, students, parents, and the public can gain access to educational, cultural, health and job-training content free of charge through the Aprende app and website https://aprende.org/

Right to culture, leisure and play

More and more of children's free time is being spent socialising, playing, creating, watching entertainment and interacting in the digital world. Mobile technology can offer children new ways to learn, expose them to people from different regions and segments of society, and encourage creativity.

- **Orange**'s SuperCoders programme introduces 9- to 13-year-olds to coding, so they can use Scratch to create presentations, games and mini apps.
- **Zain**'s Kidotainment service aims to supplement a child's school education at home by offering high quality learning content that nurtures creativity and knowledge. The platform offers more than 1,700 videos in both English and Arabic, as well as gamified educational content for children

Protection of privacy, identity and data processing

Protection of privacy, **data processing**: Many mobile operators work with expert organisations on education and awareness activities to help children and their parents to understand and manage risks to privacy. The mobile operator community also uses its influence to encourage developers to follow a privacy-by-design approach, and to provide transparent information about privacy choices

- The GSMA Privacy Design Guidelines for Mobile Application Development include specific recommendations for children and adolescents www.gsma.com/publicpolicy/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/GSMA-Privacy-Design-Guidelines-for-Mobile-Application-Development.pdf

Right to identity: Mobile services can enable children's right to be registered immediately after birth and for their identity to be preserved. For the majority of children in the world, a birth certificate is the only way they can have a legal identity, which is required to go to school, receive vaccines and for their families to access social support on their behalf.

- **Tigo Tanzania**, in partnership with RITA (Registration Insolvency and Trusteeship Agency of Tanzania) and UNICEF Tanzania, supports a birth registration initiative to accelerate the number of children with birth certificates www.tigo.co.tz/mobile-birth-registration
- **Telenor Pakistan**, in partnership with UNICEF Pakistan and the Government of Pakistan, has increased birth registration rates by developing a mobile application for authorised personnel to reports birth-related data along with the required documentation directly to the approving local registration authority www.telenor.com/sustainability/strategic-direction/sustainability-direction/digital-birth-registration/giving-pakistani-children-an-identity

Protection from violence, sexual exploitation and other harm

Accessing support / protection services: In many countries, mobile operators play a key role in helping to ensure that children in abusive situations or in need of support are able to reach their national child helpline: https://www.gsma.com/childhelplines

Protection from harm – online abuse: Many mobile operators support outreach activities which help young people with the development of 'digital resilience' skills (knowledge of how to navigate and respond to online risks). The following examples represent only a small sample of activities in this space:

- **Vodafone** partnered with The Diana Award to create Be Strong Online teaching resources covering areas from cyberbullying, to critical thinking online and peer pressure online https://bestrongonline.antibullyingpro.com/modules/
- **Telenor**'s #DigiWorld online curriculum is designed to help children become safer and more confident digital citizens http://digiworld.theparentzone.co.uk/digiworld-en
- **Telefonica**'s Dialogando portal has informative articles and videos that encourage safe and responsible use of technology. It is available in all Telefonica markets www.dialogando.com

Protection from sexual exploitation: Members of the GSMA Mobile Alliance Against Child Sexual Abuse Content have worked collaboratively to develop approaches and resources to make the mobile environment hostile to those wishing to use mobile services to access, distribute or profit from child sexual abuse materials: https://www.gsma.com/mobilealliance

Family environment, parenting and alternative care

Mobile technology can be used to disseminate information that supports the healthy development of children and helps parents in their duties. For example:

- **Tigo Paraguay** has partnered with UNICEF since 2014 to provide parents with a free weekly push-SMS with information according to a baby's gestation or development period, from conception to 3 years old: www.unicef.org/paraguay/spanish/32252_38472.html

Health and wellbeing

Health-care services through mobile technology can increase the quality, reduce the cost and extend the reach of services, particularly for children who might lack access to essential health services. Technology can also play a key role in supporting children's well-being. For example:

- **Vodacom Lesotho** and the Vodafone Foundation developed a mobile application used by nurses and HIV counsellors to register and collect information about patients. The service helped identify HIV-positive pregnant women to enable them to be brought to appropriate

medical facilities to help prevent the transmission of HIV from mother to baby
www.vodafone.com/content/foundation/hiv-treatment.html
- **Telia Company** partnered with No Isolation to develop the AV1 robot which enables children with long term disabilities to participate in school activities and classes, and to stay in touch with their friends without needing to be in the classroom. It is being widely used in Norway and has been instrumental in making children who suffer from long-term conditions feel connected and active www.teliacompany.com/en/sustainability/children-online/childrens-rights/technology

Participation: access to information, freedom of expression and thought, freedom of assembly

Children's views should be heard in matters affecting them and their communities. Mobile connectivity can promote the social, economic and political inclusion and participation of children by giving them access to information and social networks through which to communicate, congregate and voice their opinions. Digital technologies, used at scale, can provide a unique opportunity to reach out to young people for their views and inputs into community decisions, in a way that is inclusive and not tokenistic. For example:

- **Grameenphone** has partnered with UNICEF Bangladesh to encourage young citizens' participation in social causes and community decision making by providing SMS connectivity to the U-Report platform, which runs polls on community issues across the country www.grameenphone.com/about/discover-gp/sustainability/social-sustainability/u-report

Embracing child rights in the digital environment

Whilst the primary narrative relating to children's digital lives has long been centred on the themes of risk and protection, new opportunities to support children's rights have been enabled by the emergence of digital technology, including mobile services.

By encouraging all stakeholders to default to a balanced, rights-based approach to decisions which relate to children's digital lives we will be better positioned to maximise opportunities at the same time as working to minimise potential risks.