

## **SG's Address during the 2026 Africa Safer Internet Day, held online on 10<sup>th</sup> February, with Child Online Africa and the ITU Regional Office for Africa**

Distinguished guests, colleagues, partners, and friends, I am pleased to welcome you to the 2026 commemoration of Africa Safer Internet Day.

Allow me, at the outset, to acknowledge our partners whose sustained commitment has made this initiative possible. Africa Safer Internet Day has endured not because it is marked on a calendar, but because institutions and individuals continue to invest effort, expertise, and leadership to guarantee that child online safety remains a shared continental priority.

Today we have chosen to focus this commemoration on children, who remain under our collective care. The most meaningful way to demonstrate that care is by shaping digital spaces that protect their rights, reflect on their vulnerabilities, and support their development as confident digital citizens.

That responsibility is becoming important given the scale of change taking place around us. UNICEF tells us that globally, one in three internet users is under the age of 18, and an estimated 175,000 children go online for the first time each day. This means that every half second, a new child enters the digital environment, carrying with them curiosity, potential, and exposure to risks they did not design.

Nowhere does this demographic reality carry greater significance than in Africa. As the youngest region in the world, with roughly half of our population below the age of 18, the continent is witnessing a steady expansion of youth connectivity. Already, about 40% of Africans between the ages of 15 and 24 use the internet, a figure that will rise as access improves and digital services deepen their reach.

This growth has opened doors that were previously closed. Digital access has expanded educational opportunity, enabled creativity, and allowed young people to participate in social and economic life beyond physical borders. That promise, however, depends on whether the digital environment remains safe enough for children to explore it without harm.

Experience shows that as children spend more time online, they encounter a range of risks that international child-rights practice has grouped into four broad categories (Cs): Content, Contact, Conduct, and Consumer risks. Harmful material, predatory interactions, unsafe behaviour, and exploitative commercial practices increasingly reach children directly through their devices.

A UNICEF study covering 30 countries found that one in three young people had experienced online bullying, while one in five reported missing school as a result. In sub-Saharan Africa, approximately 34% of respondents reported similar experiences.

Unfortunately for us, documented reports of online child sexual exploitation rose from over 29 million in 2021 to 36.2 million by 2023. Now, three years later, those figures already belong to an earlier point in time, and they leave open the unsettling question of what the scale of harm might look like if measured again today.

The COVID-19 period accelerated this exposure, drawing many children online for education and social interaction, often without the safeguards required for continuous connectivity.

We acknowledge that the digital economy increasingly relies on data, and children often consent to data collection without understanding its implications. Today, only about 36 African countries have enacted data protection laws, and 10 have none. Even where legislation exists, few frameworks address children's data protection in a manner that is specific, enforceable, and responsive to digital realities.

These challenges are not unique to Africa, and they have prompted a global shift in thinking. In 2021, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted General Comment No. 25, clarifying how the Convention on the Rights of the Child applies in digital environments. It further guided that children's rights do not diminish online.

Other regions have moved to operationalise this principle. The European Union's Better Internet for Kids strategy, adopted in 2022, brought together safety, empowerment, and participation within a single framework. In the United Kingdom, the Age-Appropriate Design Code introduced binding obligations on digital services to prioritise children's privacy by default.

In February 2024, Africa became the first region globally to adopt a comprehensive Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy through the African Union. In late 2025, UNICEF, GSMA, and partners launched the Africa Taskforce on Child Online Protection. At national level, progress is also evident as various countries have adopted National Child Online Protection Strategies, supported by dedicated budgets.

These efforts contribute to embedding safety within the digital services children use.

Therefore, as we mark Africa Safer Internet Day 2026, our efforts must preserve the gains made, prevent their erosion, and allow for new interventions that embed safety within the digital services children will increasingly rely on.

Thank you.

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