



An open letter to the world's children

8 reasons why I'm worried, and hopeful, about the next generation

by UNICEF's Executive Director **Henrietta H. Fore**
on the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child



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Dear children of today and of tomorrow,

Thirty years ago, against the backdrop of a changing world order – the fall of the Berlin Wall, the decline of apartheid, the birth of the world wide web – the world united in defence of children and childhood. While most of the world's parents at the time had grown up under dictatorships or failing governments, they hoped for better lives, greater opportunities and more rights for their children. So, when leaders came together in 1989 in a moment of rare global unity to make a historic commitment to the world's children to protect and fulfil their rights, there was a real sense of hope for the next generation.

So how much progress have we made? In the three decades following the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in spite of an exploding global population, we have reduced the number of children missing out on primary school by almost 40 per cent. Three decades ago, polio paralyzed or killed almost 1,000 children every day. Today, 99 per cent of those cases have been eliminated. Many of the interventions behind this progress – such as vaccines, oral rehydration salts and better nutrition – have been practical and cost-effective. The rise of digital and mobile technology and other innovations have made it easier and more efficient to deliver critical services in hard-to reach communities and to expand opportunities.

Yet poverty, inequality, discrimination and distance continue to deny millions of children their rights every year, as 15,000 children under 5 still die every day, mostly from treatable diseases and other preventable causes. We are facing an alarming rise in overweight children, but also girls suffering from anaemia.

“Eight reasons why I'm worried for your future, and eight reasons why I think there is hope.”

The stubborn challenges of open defecation and child marriage continue to threaten children's health and futures. Whilst the numbers of children in school are higher than ever, the challenge of achieving quality education is not being met. Being in school is not the same as learning; more than 60 per cent of primary school children in developing countries still fail to achieve minimum proficiency in learning and half the world's teens face violence in and around school, so it doesn't feel like a place of safety. Conflicts continue to deny children the protection, health and futures they deserve. The list of ongoing child rights challenges is long.

And your generation, the children of today, are facing a new set of challenges and global shifts that were unimaginable to your parents. Our climate is changing beyond recognition. Inequality is deepening. Technology is transforming how we perceive the world. And more families are migrating than ever before. Childhood has changed, and we need to change our approaches along with it.

So, as we look back on 30 years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, we should also look ahead, to the next 30 years. We must listen to you – today's children and young people – about the issues of greatest concern to you now and begin working with you on twenty-first century solutions to twenty-first century problems.

With that in mind, here are **eight reasons why** I'm worried for your future, and **eight reasons why** I think there is hope:

1. You need clean water, clean air and a safe climate
2. One in four of you are likely to live, and learn, in conflict and disaster zones
3. We must make it OK to talk about mental health
4. Over 30 million of you have migrated from your place of birth
5. Thousands of you will officially never exist, unless we act
6. You need twenty-first century skills for a twenty-first century economy
7. Your digital footprint must be protected
8. You might be the least trusting generation of citizens ever

1. YOU NEED CLEAN WATER, CLEAN AIR AND A SAFE CLIMATE

Why I'm worried:

It sounds obvious that all children need these basics to sustain healthy lives – a clean environment to live in, clean air to breathe, water to drink and food to eat – and it sounds strange to be making this point in 2019. Yet climate change has the potential to undermine all of these basic rights and indeed most of the gains made in child survival and development over the past 30 years. There is perhaps no greater threat facing the rights of the next generation of children.

“There is perhaps no greater threat facing the rights of the next generation of children.”

The Food and Agriculture Organization noted last year that climate change is becoming a key force behind the recent continued rise in global hunger, and as escalating droughts and flooding degrade food production, the next generation of children will bear the greatest burden of hunger and malnutrition. We are already seeing evidence of extreme weather events driven by climate change creating more frequent and more destructive natural disasters, and while future forecasts vary, according to the International Organization for Migration, the most frequently cited number of environmental migrants expected worldwide by 2050 is 200 million, with estimates as high as 1 billion.

As temperatures increase and water becomes scarcer it is children who will feel the deadliest impact of waterborne diseases. Today, more than half a billion children live in areas with extremely high flood occurrence and almost 160 million in high-drought severity zones. Regions like the Sahel, which are especially reliant on agriculture, grazing and fishing, are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change. In this arid region, rains are projected to get even shorter and less predictable in the future, and alarmingly, the region is warming up at a rate one and a half times faster than the global average. In the Sahel, the climate gets hotter and the poor get poorer, and it is all too common for armed groups to exploit the social grievances that arise under such pressurized conditions.

1/2 BILLION+

children live in areas with extremely high flood occurrence



These challenges will only be compounded by the impact of air pollution, toxic waste and groundwater pollution damaging children's health. In 2017 approximately 300 million children were living in areas with the most toxic levels of outdoor air pollution – 6 or more times higher than international guidelines, and it contributes to the deaths of around 600,000 children under the age of 5. Even more will suffer lasting damage to their developing brains and lungs.

And, by 2040, one in four children will live in areas of extreme water stress and thousands will be made sick by polluted water. The management and protection of clean, plentiful, accessible groundwater supplies, and the management of plastic waste are very fast becoming defining child health issues for our time.

Why there is hope:

To mitigate climate change, governments and business must work together to tackle the root causes by reducing greenhouse gas emissions in line with the Paris Agreement. Meanwhile, we must give the highest priority to efforts to find adaptations that reduce environmental impacts on children.

UNICEF works to curb the impact of extreme weather events including by designing water systems that can withstand cyclones and saltwater contamination; strengthening school structures and supporting preparedness drills; and supporting community health systems. Innovations such as Managed Aquifer Recharge (MAR) schemes – if deployed at scale – could preserve reservoirs of clean water to protect millions of children from the dangers of water scarcity and disease.

Even in complex environments like the Sahel, there is hope – it has a young population, hungry for work and opportunity, and the climate offers vast potential for harnessing renewable, sustainable energy sources. With investment in education and employment opportunities, improved security and governance, there is every reason to feel optimism for the region’s ability to develop climate change resilience and adaptation.

To turn the tide on air pollution, governments and business must work hand in hand to reduce fossil fuel consumption, develop cleaner agricultural, industrial and transport systems and invest in scaling renewable energy sources. Many governments have taken action to curb pollution from power plants, industrial facilities and road vehicles with strict regulations. A 2011 study by the United States Environmental Protection Agency found that the country’s 1990 Clean Air Act had delivered US\$30 of health benefits to citizens for every US\$1 spent. Such policies hold the key to protecting little lungs and babies’ brains from damaging airborne pollutants and particulate matter.

In the meantime, it is vital that we search for solutions that can ameliorate the worst effects of air pollution on child health. Mongolia’s capital city Ulaanbaatar has among the most polluted air in the world during winter. The biggest source of pollution comes from coal-burning used by 60 per cent of Ulaanbaatar’s population. UNICEF innovation experts

“To mitigate climate change, governments and business must work together to tackle the root causes by reducing greenhouse gas emissions in line with the Paris Agreement.”

together with the community, government, academia and the private sector has begun to design and implement energy efficiency solutions for traditional homes to reduce coal consumption and improve air quality, including by designing “the 21st Century Ger”.

And we are finding ways to recycle and reuse plastics in innovative ways as well, reducing toxic waste and putting rubbish to good use. *Conceptos Plasticos*, a Colombian social enterprise, has developed a technique to make bricks out of non-PVC plastics that are cheaper, lighter and more durable than conventional bricks – and is using them to build classrooms. Africa’s first recycled plastic classroom was built earlier this year in Côte d’Ivoire, in just a few weeks. It cost 30 per cent less than traditional classrooms. This innovative approach of transforming plastic waste into construction bricks has the potential to turn a plastic waste management challenge into an opportunity, by addressing the right to an education with the construction of schools, empowering these communities and cleaning up the environment at the same time.

2. **ONE IN FOUR OF YOU ARE LIKELY TO LIVE, AND LEARN, IN CONFLICT AND DISASTER ZONES**

Why I'm worried:

Children have always been the first victims of war. Today, the number of countries experiencing conflict is the highest it has ever been since the adoption of the Child Rights Convention in 1989. One in four children now live in countries affected by violent fighting or disaster, with 28 million children driven from their homes by wars and insecurity. Many lose several years of school – as well as records of achievements and qualifications for future learning and careers. Conflicts and natural disasters have already disrupted learning for 75 million children and young people, many of whom have migrated across borders or been displaced. That is a personal tragedy for every single child. To abandon the aspirations of a whole generation is a terrible waste of human potential. Worse, creating a lost, disillusioned and angry generation of uneducated children is a dangerous risk that could cost us all.



“A digitally inclusive world should allow young people, no matter their situation, to get access to education.”

Why there is hope:

Some states have demonstrated effective policies to keep refugees learning. When large numbers of children escaping the war in the Syrian Arab Republic arrived in Lebanon, the government faced the challenge of accommodating hundreds of thousands of children in a public-school system already under strain. With the support of international partners, they turned that challenge into an opportunity and integrated refugee children into schools while strengthening the education system for Lebanese students at the same time.

And digital innovations can help us do more. UNICEF is collaborating with Microsoft and the University of Cambridge to develop a ‘learning passport’ – a digital platform that will facilitate learning opportunities for children and young people within and across borders. The learning passport is being tested and piloted in countries hosting refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons. A digitally inclusive world should allow young people, no matter their situation, to get access to education. Scaling up solutions like the digital learning passport could help millions of displaced children gain the skills they need to thrive.

75 MILLION

children and young people’s education disrupted by conflict and natural disaster

3. WE MUST MAKE IT OK TO TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Why I'm worried:

If we believed everything we read about teenagers today, and the images portrayed in television and film, we could be forgiven for thinking they are a wild, antisocial bunch. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. The evidence actually shows that teens today smoke less, drink less, get into less trouble and generally take fewer risks than previous generations. You might even call them Generation Sensible.

Yet there is one area of risk for adolescents showing an extremely worrisome trend in the wrong direction – one that reminds us of the invisible vulnerability that young people still carry inside of them. Mental health disorders among under-18s have been rising steadily over the past 30 years and depression is now among the leading causes of disability in the young. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 62,000 adolescents died in 2016 because of self-harm, which is now the third leading cause of death for adolescents aged 15–19.

This is not just a rich country problem – more than 90 per cent of WHO's estimated 2016 adolescent suicides were in low or middle-income countries. And while young people with severe mental disorders in lower-income countries often miss out on treatment and support, there is no country in the world that can claim to have conquered this challenge. To quote the WHO's mental health expert Shekhar Saxena, "when it comes to mental health, all countries are developing countries." With most low-income and middle-income countries spending less than 1 per cent of their total health budget on mental health, and high-income countries just 4–5 per cent, it is clear that it needs greater priority around the world.



"Depression is now among the leading causes of disability in the young."

UNICEF works with children who have suffered unthinkable traumas, gender discrimination, extreme poverty, sexual violence, disability and chronic illness, living through conflict and other experiences that place them at high risk of mental distress. The cost is not only personal, it is societal – the World Economic Forum consistently ranks mental health as having one of the greatest economic burdens of any non-communicable health issue. Despite this overwhelming evidence of a looming crisis and the alarming trends in rising self-harm and suicide rates, adolescent mental health and well-being have often been overlooked in global health programming.

Why there is hope:

With half of lifetime mental health disorders starting before age 14, age appropriate mental health promotion, prevention and therapeutic treatment and rehabilitation must be prioritized. Early detection and treatment are key to preventing episodes of mental distress reaching a crisis point and precious young lives being damaged and lost. But all too often, what stands in the way of young people seeking help at an early stage is the ongoing stigma and taboo that prevent communities talking openly about mental health problems. Fortunately, this taboo is beginning to fall, and young people, once again, are leading the way – founding non-governmental organizations, developing apps, raising awareness, and being vocal about their own struggles with mental illness and their efforts to address their condition, in hope that others feel empowered to do the same.

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UNICEF uses campaigns in schools to promote open discussion about mental health. For example, in Kazakhstan, which has one of the highest suicide rates among adolescents worldwide, UNICEF stepped up efforts to improve the mental well-being of adolescents through a large-scale pilot programme in over 450 schools. The programme raised awareness, trained staff to identify high-risk cases, and ensured referral of vulnerable adolescents to health specialists. Nearly 50,000 young people participated in the pilot with many significant improvements in well-being. The programme has since been scaled up to over 3,000 schools.

The prioritization of adolescent mental health promotion and suicide prevention has resulted in a 51 per cent decrease of self-injury mortality in the 15–17 years age group at the national level and the number of suicide cases decreased from 212 in 2013 to 104 in 2018 for this age group. And perhaps most importantly, mental health is now being integrated into mainstream primary health care services, helping to overcome the stigma which often puts young people off from seeking help.

4.

OVER 30 MILLION OF YOU HAVE MIGRATED FROM YOUR PLACE OF BIRTH

Why I'm worried:

Migration has been part of the human experience throughout history. For thousands of years, children and families have left their place of birth to settle in new communities in search of educational or employment opportunities. Today is no different. We live in a mobile world in which at least 30 million children have moved across borders.

For many, migration is propelled by a drive for a better life. But for too many children, migration is not a positive choice but an urgent necessity – they simply do not have the opportunity to build a safe, healthy and prosperous life in the place they are born. When migration is driven by desperation, it can lead to children migrating without the legal permissions they need, becoming so-called 'irregular migrants'. They often take perilous journeys across deserts, oceans and armed borders, encountering violence, abuse and exploitation on the way.

And one of the greatest migrations the world has ever seen is happening not *across* borders, but *within* borders, with millions migrating internally from rural to urban areas. In 1989, when the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted, the majority of the world's children lived in rural areas. Today the majority live in cities, and the urbanization rate is set to grow. Though urban residents on average enjoy better access to services and opportunities, inequalities can be so large that many of the most disadvantaged children in urban areas fare worse than children in rural areas. For example, the poorest urban children in 1 in 4 countries are more likely to die before their fifth birthday than the poorest children in rural areas. And the poorest urban children in 1 in 6 countries are less likely to complete primary school than rural children.

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Why there is hope:

No child should feel forced to migrate from their home, yet until the root causes are addressed, the situation is unlikely to change. That means tackling community and gang violence, strengthening protection systems so children can be safe in their communities, improving access to quality education and job opportunities, and making sure young people have the chance to gain the skills they need to build better – and safer – futures for themselves and their home countries.

UNICEF estimates that tens of thousands of children do migrate without legal permission, some with family and some alone, making them extremely vulnerable. It is essential that child migrants – legal or otherwise – have their rights upheld. Wherever they are, and whatever their story, migrant children are children first and foremost. Governments can protect child migrants by prioritizing the best interests of children in the application of immigration laws, and wherever possible, they must keep families together and use proven alternatives to detention, such as foster families or group homes – many governments are testing such approaches successfully.

“It is essential that child migrants – legal or otherwise – have their rights upheld.”

The so-called urban advantage breaks down when we look beyond averages and control for wealth, so social policies and programmes designed to support child survival and development must pay greater attention to the poorest and most marginalized urban children. Modern cities generally offer better access to clean water, health and social services, and educational opportunities. Thus, if city governments can work to create inclusive access and equality of opportunity for the children in their cities, urban life could indeed provide a boost for child survival and development.

5. THOUSANDS OF YOU WILL OFFICIALLY NEVER EXIST, UNLESS WE ACT

Why I'm worried:

Every child has a right to a legal identity, to birth registration and a nationality. But a quarter of you born today – almost 100,000 babies – may never have an official birth certificate or qualify for a passport. If your parents are stateless, from a persecuted or marginalized community, or simply if you live in a poor remote region, you may never be given an identity or birth certificate. You may even be denied citizenship or have your citizenship stripped from you. This lack of formal recognition by any state means you may be denied health care, education and other government services. Later in life, the lack of official identification can mean you enter into marriage, dangerous work, or get conscripted into the armed forces before the legal age. As an unregistered or 'stateless' child, you are invisible to the authorities – it's as if you never existed.

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For example, in the makeshift camps in Bangladesh, where hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugee families have fled seeking sanctuary, babies are born every day. A Rohingya baby is unlikely to have their birth registered and have a nationality conferred upon them, robbing them of this basic 'passport to protection' from the very start of life.

And there is another group of children today facing the threat of life without a clear legal identity and being left stateless. If you are an innocent child born to a foreign fighter from an armed group, you may not have citizenship, or you may have your citizenship stripped from you. In the Syrian Arab Republic alone, UNICEF estimates that there are close to 29,000 foreign children, most of them under the age of 12, and an additional 1,000 children believed to be in Iraq, who may have no civil documentation. They are at risk of becoming stateless and invisible.

1 IN 4 BABIES

born today may never have an official birth certificate or qualify for a passport

Why there is hope:

Registering children at birth is the first step in securing their recognition before the law, safeguarding their rights, and ensuring that any violation of these rights does not go unnoticed. The United Nations has set a goal that every human being on the planet will have a legal identity by 2030. UNICEF is supporting governments to work towards this, starting with registering all births.

For some children denied an official identity because of disagreements over their legal status, the only real solution is a political one. UNICEF urges Member States to fulfil their responsibilities to protect everyone under the age of 18 in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This includes children who are born to nationals from other states, who may be migrants, refugees or foreign fighters – because children are children first and foremost.



“The UN has set a goal that every human being on the planet will have a legal identity by 2030.”

In other circumstances, technology and innovative partnerships promise a way forward. In the Plurinational State of Bolivia, for example, TIGO – a nationwide telecommunications company – the Electoral High Tribunal and UNICEF worked to increase birth registration in hospitals and health centres, resulting in registration at birth increasing by more than 500 per cent between 2015 and 2018. In Rwanda, the automatic registering of children at birth in hospitals led to birth registration increasing from 67 per cent in 2017 to 80.2 per cent in 2018. We must urgently scale up programmes like this to reach more children. This means dramatically expanding digital access to the most remote and vulnerable communities, so registration systems can happen in real-time.

6. **YOU NEED TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SKILLS FOR A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ECONOMY**

Why I'm worried:

There are more than 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24 in the world, one of the largest cohorts in human history. Too often, they lack access to an education that will prepare them for contemporary job and business opportunities – giving them the skills and outlook they need for a twenty-first century economy. Meanwhile, in the past 30 years, relative income inequality between countries has reduced, but absolute income inequality has increased significantly, so that some children and families with low incomes are left behind and miss out on the opportunities their richer peers enjoy. Moreover, mobility has stalled over the last 30 years, miring another generation in a poverty trap determined entirely by the family she or he is born into.

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Why there is hope:

UNICEF and our global partners have launched a new initiative to prepare young people to become productive and engaged citizens. Generation Unlimited aims to ensure every young person is in school, learning, training or employed by 2030. One programme in Argentina connects rural students in remote areas with secondary school teachers, both in person and online. An initiative in South Africa called TechnoGirl gives young women from disadvantaged backgrounds job-shadowing opportunities in the STEM fields. And in Bangladesh, tens of thousands of young people are receiving training in trades such as mobile-phone

servicing. Through our Youth Challenge, we are bringing together bright young minds to solve problems in their communities, because young people are experts in their own lives and experiences. The Generation Unlimited Youth Challenge has worked with more than 800 innovators across 16 countries and produced innovative solutions such as the SpeakOut mobile app, developed by young people in North Macedonia as an anonymous way to reach out to peers for help with bullying, and The Red Code, a self-sustaining micro-entrepreneurial scheme from Pakistan, which helps young women with both menstrual hygiene management and income generation.

“Generation Unlimited aims to ensure every young person is in school, learning, training or employed by 2030.”



7. YOUR DIGITAL FOOTPRINT MUST BE PROTECTED

Why I'm worried:

The world wide web was born in the same year as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 30 years ago. Today it has radically changed the world and reshaped childhood and adulthood alike. More than 1 in 3 children globally are thought to be regular users of the internet, and as this generation grows up, that proportion is set to grow and grow.

Debates about the benefits and dangers of social media for children are becoming familiar, and more action to protect children from bullying and exposure to harmful content is certainly needed. Parent and children are also becoming aware of the risk of sharing too much personal information on social media. But the truth is, the data contained within social media profiles *created by* children are just the tip of the data iceberg. Less well understood but at least as important, is the enormous accumulation of data being *collected about* children. As children go about their daily online lives, browsing social media, using search engines, e-commerce and government platforms, playing games, downloading apps and using mobile geolocation services, a digital footprint composed of thousands of pieces of data is accumulating around them. Some of the data may even have been gathered before birth and certainly before children are able to knowingly consent to its collection and use.

“As children go about their daily online lives [...] a digital footprint composed of thousands of pieces of data is accumulating around them.”

The era of so-called ‘big data’ has the potential to transform – for the better – the provision of efficient, personalized and responsive services to children, but it also has potential negative impacts on their safety, privacy, autonomy and future life choices. Personal information created during childhood may be shared with third parties, traded for profit or used to exploit young people – particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized. Meanwhile, identity thieves and hackers have exploited vulnerabilities in

MORE THAN 1 IN 3 CHILDREN

are regular users of the internet and that proportion is set to grow and grow



e-commerce platforms to defraud and exploit adults and children alike; search engines track users' behaviour regardless of their age, and government surveillance of online activity is increasingly sophisticated around the world. Moreover, data collected during childhood have the potential to influence future opportunities, such as access to finance, education, insurance and health care. The relationship between data collection and usage, consent and privacy is complex enough for adults, but it is doubly so for children, since the internet has never been designed with children's rights and needs in mind, and few are equipped to navigate the complexities of data sharing and privacy control.

Too often, children do not know what rights they have over their own data and do not understand the implications of their data use, and how vulnerable it can leave them. Privacy terms and conditions on social media platforms are often barely understood by highly educated adults, let alone children. An analysis from *The New York Times*, showed that many social media privacy policies require a reading comprehension level that exceeds that of the average college student, meaning many users, especially the very young, are probably consenting to things they can't fully understand.

Why there is hope:

The challenge facing us all today is to ensure that we design systems that maximize the positive benefits of big data and artificial intelligence, while preserving privacy, providing protections from harm and empowering people – including children – to exercise their rights. And we are beginning to see action: governments are strengthening regulatory frameworks; private sector providers are recognizing their role; and educators are thinking about how to equip children with the tools to navigate the online world safely. It is a start.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child makes clear that children have a specific right to privacy – there is no reason this should not apply online. Contextualizing children’s right to privacy within the full range of their other rights, best interests and evolving capacities, it is evident that children’s privacy differs both in scope and application from adults’ privacy and there is a strong argument that children should be offered *even more robust protection*.

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Where children use social media they need to have real opt-in or opt-out opportunities in relation to how their data are used by the provider or other commercial interests, and the terms and conditions need to be clear and understandable to children. As some children have argued themselves, this might extend to deleting historical social media profiles for example. Where data is collected about children through tracking their online behaviours, it is crucial that clear, transparent and accessible privacy policies are made available so that children have a better chance of offering informed consent, can understand their rights and know what the intended usage of the collected data is. Equipping young people with the knowledge and skills to claim their digital rights is essential.

Private sector internet service providers and social media platforms have a crucial role to play in strengthening protections for children. They must develop transparent, ethical standards and implement heightened scrutiny and protection for the full range of data concerning children, including information on children’s location and browsing habits and especially regarding their personal information.

And some new regulatory frameworks, such as the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), represent a promising attempt at progress. The EU GDPR says that internet users, including children, have the right to be provided with a transparent and clear privacy notice, which explains how their data will be processed, that they should be able to get a copy of their personal data and have incorrect information about them rectified.

Global Pulse is a United Nations initiative that explores how new, digital data sources and real-time analytics technologies can provide a better understanding of changes in human well-being and emerging vulnerabilities, with the potential to support development. Responding to legitimate concerns about privacy and data protection, in consultation with privacy experts, Global Pulse has developed a set of privacy principles which ensure transparency about the purpose of data use, protect individual privacy, acknowledge the need for proper consent for use of personal data and respect a reasonable expectation of privacy, while making all reasonable efforts to prevent any unlawful and unjustified re-identification of individuals.

8.

YOU MIGHT BE THE LEAST TRUSTING GENERATION OF CITIZENS EVER

Why I'm worried:

Every child has the right to actively participate in their societies, and for many of you, your first experiences of civic engagement will be online. However, the majority of you will grow up as natives of a digital environment which is saturated with misinformation and so-called 'fake news,' which undermines trust and engagement with institutions and information sources. Studies indicate that many children and young people today have a hard time distinguishing fact from fiction online and as a consequence, your generation is finding it more difficult to know who and what to trust.

A United Kingdom Parliament-backed Commission on Fake News, run in partnership with Facebook, First News and The Day, found that only a quarter of the children reading online news actually trust the sources they are reading. It is tempting to see this as a positive sign of healthy critical thinking skills at work, but the same study also found that just 2 per cent of children and young people in the United Kingdom have the critical literacy skills they need to tell if a news story is real or fake. Worryingly, almost two thirds of teachers said they believe fake news is harming children's well-being by increasing levels of anxiety and skewing children's world view. And a study in the United States on schools from 12 states of the United States assessing 'civic online reasoning' – or the ability to judge the credibility of online information – found that when evaluating information on social media, children and young people are easily duped.

We know the impact of misinformation is pernicious and has real-world impacts. For example, thousands of the current generation of parents have been misled by misinformation spread through social media and mobile messaging apps about the safety of vaccines, prompting a wave of vaccine hesitancy and a worrisome resurgence of measles in high and low-income countries alike, including [France](#), [India](#) and the [Philippines](#).

Misinformation campaigns have duped children into handing over money, giving away their data and being groomed and exploited for sex. And in the past few years, we've seen how misinformation can skew democratic debate, voter intentions, and sow doubt about other ethnic, religious or social groups – creating division and unrest. This is a global issue, with reports emerging from countries as diverse as [Brazil](#), Ukraine and the [United States](#) where sophisticated disinformation campaigns have necessitated the teaching of '[Learn to Discern](#)' classes in schools. And in Myanmar, it has been alleged that a misinformation campaign played a role in inciting horrific violence against the Rohingya minority.

This is only the tip of the post-truth iceberg. As the technology to deceive improves, and verifying content becomes more difficult, the potential for lowered trust in institutions and social discord grows exponentially. For example, with sophisticated video manipulation technology using AI-generated synthetic media, it is becoming easier to distort and manipulate reality, making it seem as though individuals have said things they have not, in so-called 'deep fakes'. If these technologies advance, with no mitigating action to help the next generation root out fakes, they have the potential to fundamentally undermine confidence in science and medicine, erode core institutions and beliefs, divide communities, and pose a grave threat to our democracies.

We can no longer rest on the naïve assurance that truth has an innate upper hand against falsehood in the digital era, and so we must, as societies, build resilience against the daily deluge of falsity online. We should start by equipping young people with the ability to understand who and what they can trust online, so they can become active, engaged citizens.

“We must, as societies, build resilience against the daily deluge of falsity online.”



Why there is hope:

There is some evidence to suggest that adults should place their trust in children and young people not to fall for fakes. A recent research study published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science found that social media users over 65 shared nearly seven times as many articles from fake news domains as the youngest age group. While the reasons for this are as yet unexplained, it may indicate that a higher level of digital and media literacy among 'digital natives' acts as a protective filter. Nonetheless, it is clear we need to work harder to prepare savvy young citizens to resist manipulation and retain a trusting connection to reliable and verifiable information and institutional knowledge.

"We need to work harder to prepare savvy young citizens to resist manipulation."

While social media platforms appear to be serious in their attempts to combat misinformation and work with news organizations to clearly label trusted sources, we cannot rely on the supply side for solutions. Children have a right to an education that prepares them for the world they will live in, and today, this includes much improved digital and media literacy, critical thinking and weighing up evidence. The Director of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is including questions about distinguishing what is true from what is not true in the next round of the influential international PISA tests, seeing critical judgment as a global competency, and similar initiatives could help to mainstream education and training in digital literacy skills that could be among the most important for the next generation. Moreover, we must work hard to build meaningful connections between young people and institutions, rebuilding trust, if we are to preserve democratic societies in the future.

A final word...

Finally, the biggest reason for hope is because you – the children and young people of today – are taking the lead on demanding urgent action, and empowering yourselves to learn about, and shape the world around you. You are taking a stand now, and we are listening.

Just as the children of 1989 have emerged as leaders of today, you the children and young people of 2019 are the leaders of the future. You inspire us.

We want to work together with you to find the solutions you need to tackle the challenges of today, to build better futures for yourselves and the world you will inherit.



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