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Task Force 05
INCLUSIVE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Powering Youth Engagement for an Inclusive Digital Economy

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Abstract

This policy brief advocates for youth meaningful engagement in digital economy policy and leverages youth's perspectives on how to ensure that new digital technologies advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As the G20 shapes a more inclusive digital transformation and strives to leave no one behind, it is fundamental to engage all stakeholders, and youth must not be the exception.

While more connected to data-driven technologies than ever before, youth are absent from decision-making on data in local, national, and global fora. They have been tangentially involved in digital economy policy, despite being the most effective storytellers and witnesses to their experience with data.

Based on ongoing consultations with youth worldwide, this brief will highlight the diversity and depth of youth experiences with digital technologies and their views on data governance. It will underscore young people's recommendations covering a wide range of data policy issues (e.g. privacy, education, mental health, digital welfare, and data for the SDGs).

Through a case study focusing on digital literacy, the brief will encourage policy discussion to venture into issues that are particularly affecting younger generations. It will illustrate the educational gap affecting youth communities globally, and the new skills and tools they need to navigate the digital world.

It will also inform the debates about the connection between digital technologies – and the amount of content young people are being exposed to online – and mental health, and the urgent need to address this issue by equipping youth to handle the risks and the opportunities that digital technologies can offer.

Overall, this brief will highlight youth's policy recommendations to advance inclusive digital technologies, and encourage policymakers to place young people's needs and experiences at the heart of data governance and the digital economy agenda.

Keywords: Youth Engagement; Mental Health; Digital Economy; Digital Literacy; Digital Welfare; Data for the Sustainable Development Goals; Digital Inclusion.

Key messages and main recommendations:

- **Enhance youth participation:** Focus on promoting digital literacy, mental health, and digital welfare for youth while navigating trade-offs between empowerment and safeguarding against digital risks. Promote institutional change to enable youth participation in policy-making processes, driving actions toward a more equitable and sustainable digital future.

- **Invest in digital literacy:** Invest in comprehensive digital literacy programs that equip youth with analytical and socio-emotional skills, integrating these initiatives into early education curricula. Utilize the G20 platform to champion global efforts in promoting youth empowerment through digital literacy, fostering a generation capable of leveraging technology for their well-being while safeguarding their digital rights.

- **Promote mental health and digital welfare**: Address the complex relationship between data and youth mental health, emphasizing collaborative efforts to combat cyberbullying and stigma while building a safer online culture. Prioritize initiatives that foster a rights-conscious internet culture and empower youth to lead privacy initiatives.

- **Prioritize data for the SDGs:** Enhance digital literacy among youth to drive progress towards the SDGs and future employment, prioritizing equitable access and participation in the digital age. Promote initiatives that bridge the digital divide and advocate for simpler data privacy terms, empowering youth to control their personal data and contribute to a more inclusive digital society.

According to the World Population Prospects, 56% of the world's population is under 35 years old[1]. This data by itself already shows the necessity of considering the youth population as a stakeholder regarding any worldwide subject. In the digital economy subject, a reinforced scenario is diagnosed: 79% of people aged between 15 and 24 use the Internet, 14 percentage points more in comparison to the rest of the population, 65%[2]. Despite the importance of this demographic group, there is a lack of public policies regarding the youth community and the digital economy as one of the major issues to be addressed.

While youth have a major influence in the data economy and it is the most connected demographic ever, it is yet the most disconnected from data and digital economy policy. The lack of participation becomes especially dramatic if considering that 72 million pieces of personal data will be collected on every child around the world before their 13th birthday[3]. Or taking into account that 2.2 billion people under 25 around the globe do not have access to the internet at home[4], and 67% of youth do not have digital skills due to the lack of basic resources[5].

Youth are missing from digital economy policy and are rarely represented in spaces where decisions are being made. In fact, 13,52% of the global parliamentarians are under

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[1] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. *World Population Prospects 2022*. New York: United Nations, 2022

[2] International Telecommunication Union. ITU's Facts and Figures 2023. Geneva: International Telecommunication Union, 2023

[3] United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. HC: the digital divide is leaving young people behind. United Nations, 2023. https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2023/03/hc-digital-divide-leaving-young-people-behind

[4] United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. *It May be Time to Reinforce Universal Access to the Internet as a Human Right, Not Just a Privilege, High Commissioner tells Human Rights Council*. United Nations, 2023. https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/03/it-may-be-time-reinforce-universal-access-internet-human-right-not-just-privilege-high#:~:text=The%20digital%20divide%20meant%20a,their%20health%2C%20safety%20and%20rights.

[5] Ho, Eugene. *Labor Market Mismatch and Global Youth Employment: Coalition Is Key*. SAP News Center, 2022. https://news.sap.com/2022/09/sap-unicef-global-youth-employment-coalition/

40 years old[6]. Decisions that impact youth's future remain monopolized by senior decision makers - either through corporations that develop technologies targeting them as users or through governments shaping the frameworks and rules that will dictate their relationship with those technologies.

Moreover, the existing vocabulary around data governance is poorly explained and tools for consultation remain hermetic and not fit for reaching young people[7]. Youth are concerningly absent from digital policy discussions and lack the knowledge, skills and advocacy tools to voice their concerns and their vision of a more equitable digital future. Including their voices in discussions and decision-making is crucial to ensuring that the data economy is truly equitable and that the value of data is unlocked for all[8].

Based on ongoing consultations with youth worldwide[9], this brief highlights the diversity and depth of youth experiences with digital technologies and their views on data governance. It presents young people's recommendations covering a wide range of data policy issues (e.g. education, mental health, privacy, digital welfare, and data for the SDGs).

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[6] Power, Greg and Inter-Parliamentary Union. *Global parliamentary report : the changing nature of parliamentary representation*, 2012.
[7] The Datasphere Initiative. *Why do we need youth voices in data policy?* Datasphere Initiative, 2023 https://www.thedatasphere.org/youth4ourdatafuture/why-do-we-need-youth-voices-in-data-policy/
[8] Rozo-Paz, Mariana. *Leveraging youth's vision of data for the SDGs*. Datasphere Initiative, 2023. https://www.thedatasphere.org/news/leveraging-youths-vision-of-data-for-the-sdgs/
[9] The Datasphere Initiative. *Youth4OurDataFuture project*. 2023. https://www.thedatasphere.org/youth4ourdatafuture/

1. **Digital literacy and reskilling for the future.** Consultations through the Youth4OurDataFuture project with a sample of 50 young people and experts working with youth in all regions of the world have pointed to the need to improve digital literacy among youth communities[10]. Young people consulted have pointed out that embedding hard data analytical and programming skills as well as socio-emotional skills that would embolden their relationships with technology would significantly improve their experiences with data and digital technologies.

Current assumptions, like the belief that all young people are digital natives, are leading to deficient digital capacities and soft skills to navigate the digital world and build more inclusive, democratic societies. All the youth and experts consulted argued that integrating data and digital literacy into early school curricula, creating a more data-centered educational model, using problem-based learning on existing social matters, and designing context-specific educational experiences.

The main recommendation presented in this regard is to invest financial and nonfinancial resources in youth's digital literacy. The G20 offers the platform to encourage all stakeholders to promote digital literacy efforts across countries that are focused on young people's soft and hard skills. By championing such efforts, the G20 can foster a generation of digitally empowered youth capable of leveraging technology for their well-being while safeguarding their rights in the digital sphere.

2. **Mental health and digital welfare.** In the realm of promoting mental health and digital welfare for young people within the context of the digital economy policy, the G20

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[10] The Datasphere Initiative. *Youth4OurDataFuture project*. 2023. https://www.thedatasphere.org/youth4ourdatafuture/

must acknowledge the dual role of data in both empowering and burdening youth. While data accessibility offers valuable resources for understanding and addressing mental health issues, it also exposes young individuals to social pressures and excessive online exposure, potentially compromising their mental well-being. Thus, collective efforts are imperative to address specific challenges like cyberbullying and mental health stigmas. Engaging various stakeholders and fostering a supportive environment are key strategies advocated by youth to tackle these issues effectively[11]. This entails breaking taboos surrounding mental health discussions and leveraging data to combat cyberbullying, emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between the virtual world and reality. Additionally, initiatives aimed at building trust and understanding the impacts of the internet on youth are crucial steps towards promoting mental resilience in the digital age.

In terms of digital welfare, the G20 should prioritize safeguarding digital rights and protection for young people, as advocated by youth. Acknowledging the need for active engagement with regulators, youth emphasize the importance of advocating for robust data protection measures and securing digital rights tailored to the needs of young individuals. Moreover, embracing innovative digital solutions is essential, with youth proposing the utilization of e-government platforms, behavioral science applications, and data analysis tools to enhance digital welfare. Specifically, special attention must be given to digital protection on social media and platforms catering to youth. Whether through designing specialized digital protections or implementing monitoring mechanisms by families, addressing the unique digital needs of young people is paramount for fostering a safe and empowering online environment. By incorporating these recommendations,

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[11] The Datasphere Initiative. *Why young people are the most effective storytellers of their experience with data*. Datasphere Initiative, 2023. https://www.thedatasphere.org/news/why-young-people-are-the-most-effective-storytellers-of-their-experience-with-data/

the G20 can contribute significantly to promoting the mental health and digital welfare of young individuals amidst the evolving landscape of the digital economy.

3. **Data for the SDGs.** In advancing the use of data for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the G20 should heed the insights provided by youth, who recognize the pivotal role of data in driving progress toward sustainability and fostering education in this regard. Beyond the SDGs, young people emphasize the urgent need to reskill for the future labor market, recognizing that digital literacy is paramount in acquiring the necessary skills. They emphasize the need for clearer and more innovative methods to evaluate the SDGs, citing a lack of transparent measurements and awareness of relevant indicators. In fact, they highlight the significance of digital literacy not only in understanding and utilizing data effectively but also in acquiring the skills essential for future employment. Proposals such as developing youth-centered indexes underscore the importance of integrating digital literacy into educational curricula to equip young individuals with the necessary skills for the digital age, aligning with broader efforts to prepare them for the evolving demands of the labor market.

Equity and participation are crucial considerations in leveraging technology and data for sustainable development. While technology grants youth greater access to information and online participation platforms, there remains a significant gap in their influence over policy-making processes. The digital divide further exacerbates existing inequalities, with only those with internet access being counted in digital participation spaces. Youth advocate for making meaningful internet access a basic human right and call for international funding to bridge digital and data infrastructure disparities, ensuring equitable participation in the digital age.

Addressing data privacy concerns is paramount to fostering a conscious engagement with the digital world. Youth express a willingness to lead initiatives promoting a privacy-conscious internet culture and advocate for simpler and more comprehensible data privacy terms in applications. They recognize the dangers associated with sharing personal information online and stress the importance of having control over their data. By prioritizing privacy considerations and empowering youth to take the lead in privacy initiatives, the G20 can foster a digital environment that respects individual rights and safeguards against misuse of personal data, thus promoting a more inclusive and secure digital landscape for all.

If decision-makers embrace the recommendations put forth, a scenario of outcomes emerges wherein the promotion of digital literacy, mental health, and digital welfare for young people becomes a central focus. Through concerted efforts to invest in comprehensive mental health support systems and digital literacy initiatives, there is a potential for significant progress. However, despite these efforts, contradictions may arise concerning the balance between youth empowerment via skills and effective safeguarding against digital risks. While enhancing digital literacy equips youth with essential skills for navigating the digital landscape – building healthier online relationships, avoiding cyberbullying, promoting inclusion – and contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), these efforts would be void without involving all the relevant stakeholders. Literacy and youth educational efforts will not be efficient enough to tackle the issues outlined in this brief if companies owning data-driven business models that target youth as main users are not involved in the conversation and in the design and implementation of the policies and strategies to build safer, more inclusive, and more transparent online environments. It is thus key for decision-makers to navigate this complex setting of actors and invite them all to the table, including diverse youth communities and private sector actors whose roles are key in shaping a more equitable and inclusive data and digital economy.

There is also a need to think about what is the best enabling environment that should be built around digital economy policy to effectively include youth at the core of the decision-making processes. The G20 not only includes the official Y20 path but could lead the way for international fora to open effective pathways for effective youth participation. One key tradeoff to take into consideration is how the institutionalization

of youth participation would require a transformation of the existing institutions and traditional pathways for engagement. As has been confirmed by experts[12], "youth participation in policy-making processes is an action-oriented process involving young people in institutions, initiatives and decisions, and affording them control over resources that affect their lives"[13]. Promoting institutional change to enable action and agency for youth communities would imply a financial and nonfinancial investment coming from institutional actors and the political will to drive these actions. Overall, recognizing the urgency and need to involve youth would be fundamental to shape digital economy policies, transforming institutions, and building pathways for participation would be key on the road toward a more equitable and sustainable digital future.

Lastly, in the scenario where the recommendations focus on bridging the digital divide and promoting equity in digital participation, there's potential for a more inclusive digital society. By addressing disparities in internet access and enhancing youth participation in policy-making processes, decision-makers can create a more equitable digital landscape. However, contradictions may arise concerning the allocation of resources and priorities. While investing in closing the digital divide is essential for ensuring equal opportunities, it may divert resources from other pressing societal needs. Decision-makers must navigate these trade-offs, seeking innovative solutions that address digital inequalities while also addressing broader social challenges. Ultimately, embracing these recommendations requires a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in promoting youth well-being, digital literacy, and children's and youth's rights within the evolving digital economy.

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