

ACERWC WORKING GROUP ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND BUSINESS STATEMENT ON SAFER INTERNET DAY

The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), through its Working Group on Children's Rights and Business joins the global community in commemorating Safer Internet Day 2026 under the theme "Smart tech, safe choices – Exploring the safe and responsible use of AI." This theme highlights the shared responsibility of States, national ICT regulatory authorities, internet service providers, business actors, and other key stakeholders to ensure that the digital environment is safe, inclusive, and empowering for all children.

As digital technologies, including emerging artificial intelligence-driven systems, increasingly create opportunities that shape children's development, education and social interactions and daily lives, it is imperative that their rights are fully respected, protected, and fulfilled in the digital sphere, in accordance with the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

In this context, and on Safer Internet Day, the Working Group of the ACERWC recalls the recent adoption of the African Union Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy (2024), which establishes a comprehensive continental framework for advancing children's safety and empowerment online through a whole of society approach. The Policy underscores the shared responsibilities of States, business actors, and other stakeholders to mitigate online risks, promote child centred design, safeguard children's data and privacy, and ensure that digital innovation consistently serves the best interests of the child.

Accordingly, the Working Group of the ACERWC calls upon States Parties to accelerate the implementation of comprehensive legal, regulatory and policy frameworks that protect and empower children in the digital environment. States Parties are urged to strengthen child-centred digital policies and regulatory frameworks, including through robust data protection regimes, effective responses to online child sexual exploitation and abuse, accessible reporting and support mechanisms, and the integration of child online safety and digital literacy within education systems. Attention must be given to children in vulnerable situations, including children with disabilities, to ensure inclusive access, protection and participation online.

The Working Group of the ACERWC further underscores the critical responsibility of business actors and technology companies, particularly those developing, deploying and operating digital technologies, online platforms and artificial intelligence systems accessed by children. In line with the AU Policy's emphasis on corporate responsibility, businesses are called upon to conduct child-rights-based due diligence, embed safety-by-design and age-appropriate design measures, safeguard children's personal data and privacy, and prevent, mitigate and remedy adverse impacts linked to their operations and business relationships. Digital innovation must be guided by the best interests of the child, ensuring that commercial practices do not expose children to harm or discrimination, violate their right to privacy, or expose them to exploitation in the online environment.

Recognizing the vital role played by civil society organisations, community actors, and other stakeholders in advancing child online safety and empowerment, the Working Group of the ACERWC encourages these actors to support awareness raising, research, capacity building, and child friendly educational initiatives. Such efforts are essential to equipping children, parents, and caregivers with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the digital environment safely and responsibly. Collaboration between civil society, States and businesses remains essential to strengthen accountability, share best practices and ensure that children's voices meaningfully shape digital policies and solutions.

As Africa's digital transformation accelerates, Safer Internet Day 2026 offers a timely reminder that children's rights must remain at the centre of digital innovation and regulation. The Working Group of the ACERWC calls upon States Parties, business actors, civil society and all relevant stakeholders to intensify coordinated action backed by measurable commitments and transparent reporting to protect and empower children online. No child should be left behind in the digital age, and the best interests of the child must guide all decisions and actions affecting children in the digital environment.

The ACERWC, through its Working Group, reaffirms its commitment to working with State Parties, businesses, regulators, and all stakeholders to ensure that Africa's digital future is one in which children are safe, empowered, and able to thrive.

NOTE- More information about the ACERWC Working Group on Children's Rights and Business can be found at <https://www.acerwc.africa/en/special-mechanisms/working-groups/working-group-business-and-childrens-rights>

Done in Maseru, Kingdom of Lesotho

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