Youth-Informed Strategies for Maintaining Young People's Digital Safety Across Sectors

Young people are increasingly engaging online. In 2020, 71 percent of young people aged 15 – 24 had internet access, as compared to 57 percent of the rest of the population. Digital safety is of utmost concern as young people face threats to their privacy, misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech. These threats are especially harmful to young women and young people of diverse identities and backgrounds. Digital safety tools and resources must be inclusive of and accessible to diverse youth populations, including young people with disabilities, young people living in rural areas, and young people working across development sectors, such as health, economy, and education.

As a means of generating youth-informed considerations and recommendations on how young people can stay safe online, the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) and YouthPower2: Learning and Evaluation (YP2LE) convened its Youth Advisory Group and Digital Youth Council in May 2023 to discuss strategies to maintain young people’s digital security across sectors. This one-pager outlines the digital context and recommendations identified during that discussion.

CEPPS. Funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), CEPPS established the Youth Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Cross-Sectoral Initiative (CSI) to examine the intersections between DRG programs and initiatives in other youth development sectors, bringing together a global cohort of practitioners, young leaders, and donors from across disciplines in a knowledge-sharing forum.

YP2LE. In 2015, the USAID funded the YouthPower Learning project to expand the evidence base for what works in Positive Youth Development (PYD) and build the capacity of youth development practitioners, researchers, and other relevant stakeholders to apply PYD on the ground. Building upon that success, the USAID-funded follow-on activity, YouthPower2: Learning and Evaluation (YP2LE), deepens the integration of PYD evidence and best practices into youth programming, ensuring more sustainable change. These projects included the creation of the YouthLead.org platform and the ongoing engagement of YouthLead members.

1 See: https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/2021/11/15/youth-internet-use/#:~:text=In%202020%2C%2071%20per%20cent%20of%20the%20other%20age%20groups
Important Considerations for Young People's Digital Safety

- **Digital Literacy.** Young people experience threats like digital crime and cyberbullying daily; they must have the tools and resources to protect themselves online. As defined by USAID, digital literacy is “the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital devices and networked technologies for participation in economic, social, and political life.”² Digital literacy can support young people to protect their personal information, learn to navigate online spaces safely, and share accurate information across platforms to avoid spreading misleading or false information.

- **Digital Inclusion and Accessibility.** Supporting young people with diverse identities in protecting themselves online is critical. Providing gender-informed, digital safety resources in a variety of languages and with different accessibility features can increase young people’s understanding of how to keep themselves and their peers safe online. Offering support for survivors of online violence and hate speech, and ensuring those with limited internet access are equipped with digital safety skills and knowledge can make digital spaces accessible and inclusive.³ Young people can and should learn from one another, share their experiences, and foster a community to ensure digital spaces are safe for everyone.

- **Cross-Sectoral Approach.** Technology is found across the workforce, whether using social media for online campaigns, connecting with colleagues around the world, using online tools for research, or accessing information stored in the cloud. With the prevalence of technology comes opportunities for hackers to access sensitive or personal information. Given the impact this can have on work across sectors, young people can lead efforts to make digital spaces safer using a cross-sectoral approach. Engaging diverse stakeholders, such as young people and government officials, community leaders, and private sector employees, can spark conversations around what practices work best across sectors. Research and tailored sector-specific approaches should be considered to maximize digital security.⁴

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³ For a Digital Inclusion Starter Kit, see: https://www.youthlead.org/resources/digital-inclusion-starter-kit
⁴ For more on cross-sectoral youth engagement, see: https://csitoolkit.cepps.org/
Important Considerations for Young People's Digital Safety

For Young Leaders:

- **Strengthen Digital Skills.** Young people should take advantage of opportunities, such as digital literacy trainings, to strengthen relevant skills that proactively combat digital threats. Equipped with these skills and knowledge, young leaders can guide workshops, inform policies on digital safety, and collaborate with technology-focused organizations. Young people’s unique experiences can help lead and shape skill-strengthening initiatives aimed at increasing digital safety.

- **Inform Policymaking.** Building constructive partnerships with stakeholders, such as government officials or local leaders, can help young people influence policies and strategies on digital safety that impact them at all levels. Young leaders can encourage dialogue between stakeholders to create accountability measures and promote transparent communication with other community members.

- **Conduct Research.** Young people should explore ways that they and their peers are engaging in cross-sectoral efforts through prevention or response mechanisms to maintain digital safety across sectors. By identifying existing digital safety measures, as well as gaps, young people can advocate for implementing new practices or adapting existing efforts to all spaces and sectors and tailor them to diverse youth populations who are active online.

For Practitioners:

- **Encourage Youth Leadership.** When implementing digital safety programming, practitioners should partner with young people at all phases of the activity life cycle and at regular intervals, specifically marginalized young people, as their experiences in digital spaces represents a significant portion of online activity. Practitioners should also strive to safeguard young people engaged in digital programs, using the lived realities of young participants to better align and focus safeguarding principles. Special considerations should be taken to safeguard young people under age 18 and to engage their parents or caregivers during activities.

- **Engage Diverse Stakeholders.** Partnering with diverse stakeholders to promote and support digital safety for young people is also important, considering different environments and actors across sectors. Practitioners can connect technology and social media companies with young leaders through design processes to inform digital safety strategies and practices. Connecting young people with key stakeholders as leaders in digital spaces increases their representation at the local, regional, and national levels and enables them to inform and drive decisions impacting them.

- **Develop and Promote Educational Opportunities.** Practitioners should incorporate digital literacy and safety programming into all relevant youth-focused trainings and workshops. Practitioners can identify ongoing efforts and partner with civil society organizations, educational institutions, or government bodies implementing these programs to reduce duplication and amplify reach.