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**Submissions from entities in the United Nations system, international
organizations and other stakeholders on their efforts in 2023 to
implement the outcomes of the WSIS**

Submission by

ECPAT International

This submission was prepared as an input to the report of the UN Secretary-General on "Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels" (to the 27th session of the CSTD), in response to the request by the Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 2006/46, to the UN Secretary-General to inform the Commission on Science and Technology for Development on the implementation of the outcomes of the WSIS as part of his annual reporting to the Commission.

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2023 Submission by ECPAT International to the preparation of the Secretary-General's report on progress made in 2023 on implementation of the outcomes of the WSIS.

Executive Summary

Throughout 2023, ECPAT International has continued to be an active leader in civil society initiatives to ensure the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit. Across the world, ECPAT is leading and working in cross-sector partnerships to deliver research, build civil society capacity, shape grassroots advocacy and build campaigns to address the impact of the information society on children's right to safety from sexual exploitation and abuse.

Societies across the world must face the growing scale and diversifying manifestations of technology facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, notably the challenges presented by Artificial Intelligence, privacy-enhancing software such as end-to-end encryption, and the ease of rapid digital payment and connectivity. It has never been more crucial for civil society to hold governments and the private sector to account for protecting children.

ECPAT is at the forefront of such initiatives across the world, and continues to engage in multi-stakeholder dialogue and coalitions including the IGF to increase awareness, shape evidence-based law and policy, and bring children's voices to the forefront of the conversation about their digital lives and the future of the online world.

Part two: Trends and Experiences

ECPAT International welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the preparation of the Secretary-General's report which will assess progress made in 2023 in the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit.

In 2023, rapid evolutions in technology have further gathered pace and increased the attention of governments and the public to the complex ethical and human rights implications of new and frontier digital technologies. Recently, attention has been focused largely on Artificial Intelligence (AI), in particular generative AI models, although End-to-End Encryption (E2EE) also stands out as the battleground for one of the defining issues of the information society, namely how societies balance the right to privacy with the right to security, protection and safety. However, existing risks presented to children by the information society, from social media, online gaming, communications tools, web hosting services, live streaming technology and many more, remain clear. Increased research outputs from civil society, academia and research institutes and inter-governmental organisations, including those where children and young adults are consulted about their exposure to risk and their experiences of abuse in the online environment, are shining a renewed light on the need for action.

Of note largely due to growing media, policy and public attention globally is the use of Generative AI to produce child sexual abuse material depicting real children and artificially generated children

is now established. This phenomenon is highly concerning due to the speed at which the technology is developing, including the relative ease of using open source generative AI models, including by children. This material, as all child sexual abuse material, is used for the purposes of sexual solicitation, or grooming, as well as extortion, and enables people with a sexual interest in children including sex offenders to realise their fantasies for sexual gratification.

In addition, the relative ease of access to children through the use of mainstream social media, online gaming and messaging services is also driving new and facilitating existing modus operandi of child sexual exploitation and abuse occurring across platforms. The proliferation of digital payment options such as e-wallets is further placing children at risk from new forms of monetised sexual exploitation. This includes not only sexually-motivated but also financially-motivated sexual extortion, showing a concerning resurgence of exploitation committed online for criminal, sometimes organised, financial gain. Here, generative AI is also being applied to produce sexual content used for extortion, and a large proportion of targeted children and victims are boys.

Finally, a shift or reframing that may be necessary is to think about technology-facilitated sexual abuse and exploitation to capture a broader set of circumstances in which technology can facilitate harm. For example, there is growing attention to the role of technology to recruit victims of trafficking for sexual or other purposes, to target migrant children and youth, and to contact and exploit children in humanitarian settings. Within travel and tourism, the use of e-commerce, social media, messaging and financial technology platforms to arrange, pay for, solicit and carry out in person or online child abuse and exploitation is now standard.

With the need for a coordinated response never more urgent, there remain significant **obstacles** to global efforts to prevent and respond to child sexual exploitation and abuse in digital environments. These obstacles relate to the overarching categories of: regulation and policy, data protection, technology, and society.

Regulation and policy - Globally, there is a swathe of technology regulation in place, in development or under consideration. This responds to a lack of regulation placing clear and accountable obligations on providers of information services, in particular social media, gaming and messaging platforms to take proactive measure to prevent harm to children. However, it also brings risk related to further fragmentation of internet governance and presents risks associated with censorship in the guise of child protection, and with legislation based on moral panic rather than objective need. A coordinated sectoral response to child sexual exploitation and abuse online remains plagued by the business models of information society services that in their majority place commercial interests over user safety and wellbeing. One impact of this phenomenon is the politicisation of children's issues to address broader societal challenges produced by the information society.

Technology – a key feature and paradox of the information society is the fact that the same technology used to harm children is essential in protecting them rapidly, effectively and at scale. However, proprietary standards and a general absence of integrated safety in the design stage of new and updated products means not only that individual companies' products remain unfit for safe use by children, but also incompatible or not interoperable with products and safety features developed by competitors. Given the multi-platform nature of children's digital lives, as well as the knowledge and intentional exploitation of this by those seeking sexual contact with children, these gaps in technological alignment are putting children at risk and failing to protect them from harm.

Data protection – Technological misalignment is underpinned by the inability due to legislation or commercial interests to share essential data within the private sector and with law enforcement or civil society. Here, the crucial values and practice of personal data protection underpinning the information society continue to prevent much needed flow of or access to information for trend analysis and to design evidence-informed prevention strategies.

Society – Efforts to uphold children’s rights in the information society remain deeply influenced by the socio-cultural context in which child sexual abuse is acknowledged, discussed and responded to. The complex trauma of childhood sexual violence and its hidden nature due to social taboos affect disclosure and help-seeking behaviour among children and adult survivors. Emphasis on prevention still fails to capture the multi-faceted nature of prevention, which includes not only education and awareness, but also the use of technology to support help-seeking, prevent abuse, and respond to abuse after it occurs.

Part three: Innovative policies, programmes and projects

Responding to this, ECPAT continues to play an active, outcome-driven and collaborative role in ensuring that governments and providers of information society services take responsibility and are held accountable for protecting children from technology-facilitated sexual abuse and exploitation, in line with their rights and in furtherance of SDGs 5.2 and 16.2. Below we outline the key lines of action:

1. Coordination and Convening

- [ECPAT](#) is co-leading regional advocacy and campaigning to advocate for legislation in the EU that will place obligations on online service providers to prevent and combat child sexual abuse online. ECPAT does this as part of the [ECLAG](#), which drives and EU Campaign for [Chilfsafety ON!](#) In 2023, [ECPAT](#) is launching a new campaign.
- Coordinating grassroots civil society advocacy and campaigns through regional and thematic engagement with ECPAT network members in every region where its 126 members are located.
- Coordination of the [Dynamic Coalition on Children’s Rights in the Digital environment](#) as a workstream of the IGF, including a [session](#) at IGF Kyoto 2023.
- [Convening and mobilizing civil society from Eastern and Southern Africa](#) to discuss the policy and programming uptake of research on online child sexual abuse and exploitation via the [Disrupting Harm](#) project.
- Engaging in discuss with the online gaming sector to integrate a gender lens in their safety and wellbeing policy.
- In 2023, ECPAT continues to chair the Civil Society Sector Reference Group within the WeProtect Global Alliance;
- Organisation of the first ever ECPAT Global Boys Summit in Casablanca in June 2023, bringing practitioners together to co-design action for boys, and including consideration of the digital environments.

2. Research and data collection on the role of technology in facilitating exploitation

- Collaborating with civil society partners in the EU, including the NSPCC, Eurochild and Terre des Hommes Netherlands to conduct EU, UK and global research and data collection on child and adult views on children’s rights in the information society.
- Leading legal analysis for the second phase of the Disrupting Harm initiative in cooperation with INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, in 12 countries.
- Cooperating with ECPAT France and local civil society in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger, and Ivory Coast to conduct research into manifestations of online child sexual abuse and exploitation , through project ENSEMBLE.

- Conducting research on sexual exploitation in humanitarian settings in Iraq, Kenya and Ethiopia, which has highlighted the role of technology in these settings.

3. Advocacy and Campaigns

- Through a global Alliance (Down to Zero), ECPAT is leading regional advocacy to raise safety standards by information society companies in Southeast and South Asia. This is aligned and extends beyond its existing work to support implementation of the [Regional Plan of Action for the Protection of Children from All Forms of Online Exploitation and Abuse in ASEAN](#).
- Convening high level expert spaces to highlight the changing role of the information society in relation to sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism. In October 2023, ECPAT convened events with the UN Special Representative to the Secretary General on Violence against Children Najat Maalla and Queen Silvia of Sweden.

4. Strategic partnerships

- Through a partnership with Scotiabank Peru and its partners CHS Alternativo, ECPAT has been highlighting the role and responsibility of the financial sector to prevent and respond to the mis-use of digital financial services for the sexual exploitation and abuse of children.
- Cooperation with Paniamor Costa Rica to support further development of the [e-mentores](#) initiative, which is a self-regulatory code for corporate social responsibility by online service providers in Costa Rica.

(b) Future actions or initiatives

- Through ongoing civil society coalition work, ECPAT will continue to advocate with policymakers in the EU to ensure the best interests of the child.
- ECPAT will continue to coordinate and expand the work of the Dynamic Coalition on children's rights in the Digital Environment at the IGF.
- ECPAT will also increase data collection and dialogue with its members around the world to shape civil society advocacy for the rights of children in the information society.
- In addition, ECPAT will continue to identify gaps and opportunities for research and data collection to inform global and local law, policy and advocacy to protect children from technology facilitated sexual abuse and exploitation;
- ECPAT through its global boys initiative will continue to engage the online gaming sector to define concrete actions for increased child safety in online gaming settings.