

09 June 2023

## A JOINT STATEMENT BY JOINING FORCES ALLIANCE DURING THE COMMEMORATION OF THE DAY OF THE AFRICAN CHILD

### A Call for Progressive Bold Actions in the Protection of Children Against OCSEA

#### Introduction

The Day of the African Child (DAC) has been commemorated since 1991, in remembrance of the student uprising in protest of poor quality education in Soweto South Africa in 1976. This year 2023, the DAC focuses on the theme *'The Rights of the Child in the Digital Environment'*.

We realise that the advancement of the digital environment has come along with benefits as well as challenges. Some of the benefits include access to health and educational information for children, especially those living in marginalised places. In Zimbabwe for example, Joining Forces is implementing an educational project in emergencies that focuses on a mobile learning-based platform called Viamo (Via Mobile). Similarly in East Africa, the Joining Forces has utilised the online platforms to create awareness on child exploitation, and increasing access to relevant services for children. On the other hand, some of the challenges include infringement of children's rights online and Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA). These include sharing of child sexual abuse materials, livestreaming of online child sexual abuse, online grooming of children for sexual purposes, sexting and sextortion (presenting risk of OCSEA), online coercion and blackmail, possession, production and sharing of indecent images of children, and prohibited images, among others.<sup>1</sup>

#### OCSEA - The Emerging Child Protection Challenge

As an emerging child protection challenge, OCSEA can have a devastating impact on children. The Internet World Statistics states that there were about 590 million internet users (43% internet penetration) in Africa in 2022. A third of these users are children who rely on the digital environment for among other reasons access to education opportunities, health information, entertainment and to enjoy their rights in emergency situations such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Africa Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of Children (2023), lack of access to the internet impedes children's rights such as education, freedom of expression, freedom of association and the right to play, among others. Notably though, whereas

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<sup>1</sup> Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI), 05.03.2020



the digital environment provides immense opportunities for children to thrive, it presents risks that must be addressed to ensure their safety online. Such risks include; using children in the production and distribution of child sexual abuse materials, sharing child sexual abuse material, sexual extortion, online grooming, cyber bullying, and exposure of children to adult pornography and compromising children's privacy. The COVID 19 pandemic escalated more violence against children in general, and technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in particular<sup>2</sup>. This was due to the increased online activities and unsupervised internet use by the children, hence exposing them to greater risks of OCSEA.

Although we acknowledge efforts undertaken by the African Union and some of its member states to address OCSEA and related evils, for example putting in place the relevant instruments such as the Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection<sup>3</sup>, the efforts by the ACERWC to draft general comment no. 7 on article 27 to specifically articulate the provisions to prevent SEA including OCSE, and the relevant policy frameworks in some of the AU Members States, for example the [National Action Plan on OCSEA](#)<sup>4</sup> in Kenya, children are still confronted with the risk and reality of OCSEA. Some of the AU Member States either have no or weak legislative frameworks to ensure the protection of children against OCSEA. For example, the Malabo Convention has been ratified by only 13 countries and is still not in force (ACERWC, 2023). Other challenges include: Low public awareness about the issue, little effort by governments and relevant stakeholders to prevent it, little support for survivors of OCSEA, and few offenders brought to justice.<sup>5</sup>

As child-focused organisations in East and Southern Africa, we have contributed to increased access to safe internet for children, and also addressed the emerging OCSEA in countries of our operation. In Kenya for example, World Vision supported the provision of laptops in Narok County; the computers have a software called the Learning Tool Kit (LTK) that has improved literacy levels. Similarly, Terre des Hommes has created awareness on OCSEA, empowered children to detect and report online violence, provided livelihoods support to children where necessary, sensitised the internet service providers to adopt safety measures, and held duty bearers accountable for the protection of children in East Africa. Furthermore, in Zimbabwe World Vision leads a consortium; Education in Emergencies with Plan International and Save the Children, that focuses on mobile learning-based platform called Viamo (Via Mobile). In collaboration with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, lessons shared are of high

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/media/113731/file/Ending%20Online%20Sexual%20Exploitation%20and%20Abuse.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/29560-treaty-0048\\_-\\_african\\_union\\_convention\\_on\\_cyber\\_security\\_and\\_personal\\_data\\_protection\\_e.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/29560-treaty-0048_-_african_union_convention_on_cyber_security_and_personal_data_protection_e.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>

<https://www.socialprotection.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/National-Plan-of-Action-to-Tackle-Online-Child-Sexual-Exploitation-and-Abuse-in-Kenya-2022-2026.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://drive.google.com/drive/search?q=recommendations%20on%20OCSEA>



quality and meet the country's education priorities. Learners access the system when their parent's mobile numbers are loaded onto the Viamo platform and can receive lessons through interactive voice responses.

In December 2022, ChildFund and World Vision International supported the African Union to host an OCSEA consultative workshop attended by representatives of sixteen AU Member States that resulted in the development of a continental roadmap to combat OCSEA. In April this year, ChildFund supported child advocates to make submissions to the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child during its 41st Ordinary Session. They called upon governments to enact and implement laws and regulations on online child protection.

### **Recommendations**

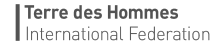
On this day, June 9th 2023, we the Joining Forces Alliances - East and Southern Africa recognize efforts that everyone is taking to create a digital safe environment for children. As we continue working together to foster a digital safe environment, make the following recommendations to the African Union, Member States, and civil society;

#### **We call upon the African Union and its organs to:**

1. The AU Commission should consider developing implementation guidelines for member states and drafting a plan of action to address gaps in the Malabo Convention, including protections for human rights in the use of artificial intelligence, measures to ensure proper resourcing for domestic data protection frameworks, and the establishment of regional bodies to monitor implementation.
2. Develop a model African data protection law that could provide a roadmap for states to enact legislation in line with the Malabo Convention.
3. Provide support for data protection authorities in Africa, including the Network of African Data Protection Authorities to advance the implementation of the Convention and align efforts across the continent.
4. Engage member states that have not yet ratified the Malabo Convention to do it, and hold them accountable for the fulfilment of children's rights online.

#### **We call upon Member States to:**

1. Develop and implement policies and laws that protect children from online child sexual exploitation and abuse, and to allocate budgets for child protection.
2. Strengthen the legal and justice systems to protect the rights of children, especially girls and to take decisive action against those who perpetrate online violence against them.
3. Provide all children reporting online sexual exploitation and abuse, and their caregivers, with a standard information package about their rights, including any right to compensation, and the procedures that will be followed.
4. Strengthen and diversify mechanisms for children to disclose concerns, report incidents and seek help and advice, including through simple, child-friendly, online methods.



5. Invest in the training of police officers, prosecutors, judges/magistrates, lawyers, courtroom staff, child protection officers and frontline social support workers on OCSEA.
6. Develop standard operating procedures and implement child-friendly justice as envisaged in the relevant Children Protection Laws in all cases of online child sexual abuse and exploitation.
7. Institutionalise child participation mechanisms that ensure the voices of children are included in all efforts to combat OCSEA and support children/youth innovation platforms where children can contribute to development of solutions to combat OCSEA.
8. Institute legal frameworks that oblige internet service providers and other industry players to retain data, filter/block/take down child sexual abuse materials (CSAM), embrace a safety by design approach when developing products and programmes and comply promptly with law enforcement requests for information.

**We call upon Civil Society Organizations, Research Institutions and Donor Organisations to:**

1. Support governments' efforts to enact legislation against OCSEA.
2. Raise awareness of communities, parents and children on online child sexual exploitation and abuse, including the role of technology, and the measures they are to take to ensure their safety.
3. Undertake and disseminate research findings for evidence informed interventions.
4. Fund interventions geared towards combating OCSEA.
5. Ensure children's access to information technology and provide training to help them minimise and manage online risks.
6. Ensure Communications and internet business centres follow Safeguarding protocols related to children's access to and safety when using equipment in their facilities.

In conclusion, the Joining Forces Alliance - East and Southern Africa remains committed to strengthening its collaboration with key state and non-state actors, and to continue its regional lobby and advocacy initiatives in ensuring OCSEA prevention and promotion of children's rights online.

Thank you for your attention!

**Signed by:**

**On behalf of Regional Directors - Joining Forces**



### **About Joining Forces**

*Joining Forces (JF) is an alliance of the six largest child-focused international NGOs namely: ChildFund Alliance, Plan International, Save the Children International, SOS Children's Villages International, Terre des Hommes International Federation and World Vision International. For more information, visit*

*[www.joining-forces.org](http://www.joining-forces.org)     [www.childfund.org](http://www.childfund.org)     /     [www.plan-international.org](http://www.plan-international.org)     /  
<https://www.savethechildren.net/> / [www.sos-childrensvillages.org](http://www.sos-childrensvillages.org) / [www.terredeshommes.org/](http://www.terredeshommes.org/) /  
<https://www.wvi.org/>*

### **For Further Enquiries**

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