

# Protecting children in the age of AI

EDITOR: Uganda joins the rest of the world today in commemorating Safer Internet Day under the theme *Smart tech, safe choices*.

*Exploring the Safe and Responsible Use of AI.*

The theme resonates strongly at a time when online sexual exploitation and abuse of children (OCSEA) is emerging as a growing, but under-reported child protection concern.

While Uganda has made progress in child protection policy and legislation, significant gaps remain in addressing online harms.

Awareness of OCSEA among parents, teachers, law enforcement officers and even children themselves is still limited.

Existing laws and enforcement mechanisms struggle to keep pace with rapidly evolving digital technologies, while co-ordination across sectors remains weak. Access to specialised services for victims and survivors is uneven and data on offender management and rehabilitation is limited.

The technology and telecommunications sector has a critical role to play. As gatekeepers of digital platforms and services, companies operating in Uganda carry a responsibility to integrate child safety by design approaches, support child-sensitive regulation and invest in awareness and reporting mechanisms. Yet child-centred safeguards and innovative protective technologies are still not widely adopted.

A report by the *End Violence Partnership's Safe Online Initiative* in 2021 estimated that at least 215,000 children had experienced online child sexual exploitation and abuse in 2020. With the advancement of social media today, the numbers could be much higher.



**Titus Tumusiime**

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**The writer is the country director, ChildFund Uganda**