Adolescent Perspectives on Artificial Intelligence

A REPORT ON CONSULTATIONS WITH ADOLESCENTS ACROSS THE WORLD | FEBRUARY 2021

unicef | for every child

Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

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UNICEF works in the world's toughest places to reach the most disadvantaged children and adolescents – and to protect the rights of every child, everywhere. Across 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive and fulfill their potential, of early childhood through adolescence. And we never give up.

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Introduction

"In general, the digital world and AI world has not been adapted for adolescents, because it is mostly created only by adults. So, clearly, there is an adult-centric bias ...."

VOICES OF YOUTH, AI WORKSHOP, CHILE

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) promotes the right of young children and adolescents to participate in decision-making in policies, processes and practices that affect their lives. UNICEF and its partners have accumulated considerable experience with ways to engage adolescents and encourage their active participation in decision-making to realise these rights. Building on its accumulated expertise, UNICEF is developing a children's rights perspective in the rapidly-emerging sphere of artificial intelligence (AI).

This document reports on workshops conducted in 2020 with 245 adolescents in five countries. It includes the adolescents' views and aspirations on AI; the nature of their experiences with AI; and their opinions on how they understand the risks and opportunities that AI presents in their lives. It features key messages that emerged from these consultations and the methods employed to engage adolescents in dialogue on AI. An appendix provides a selection of adolescent views on AI in their own words.

The workshops with adolescents are part of the broader AI for Children Project led by the UNICEF Office of Global Insight and Policy. The adolescents' voices, combined with consultations with experts around the world, shaped the development of a draft Policy Guidance on AI for Children. The guidance is aimed at governments and businesses to help them create AI policies and systems that are child-centred.

1.0 /

Top Ten Observations

Below are the top ten facilitators' observations of adolescent participation at the AI workshops, and their implications for future workshops.

1. Some stated strongly that decision-making about AI is adult-centric.

In a few of the workshops, adolescents said that they were often consulted but were not considered to be decision-makers. For these participants, AI systems like many others, are adult-centric. This view was specifically highlighted in Chile and São Paulo, Brazil, where participants emphasised the need for adults to acknowledge that adolescents and children have independent insights, experiences and views and that they are capable of making decisions.

> **Explore how to involve children and adolescents more in AI decision-making.**

2. Most learned about AI in their homes and among peers, rather than in school.

Most participants revealed high personal engagement with AI in their homes and among their peers. Most also said that they do not learn about AI at school, as part of the curriculum. A few exceptions include two participants from São Paulo who had taken elective courses at school, while in Chile, some had designed AI applications at school.

> **Explore how AI can be included in the formal school curriculum.**

3. Most had low awareness of the risks associated with AI.

While some were able to highlight the risks associated with AI (see Section 3.3 for a list of these risks) and the need to exercise caution, most either took risks for granted or considered them matter-of-factly, displaying low risk-awareness of AI.

> **Raise greater awareness about the risks associated with AI.**

4. Many had uncritical views about AI, but some held strong critical views.

While many reflected low levels of critical awareness of AI, some voiced strongly-held critical views about the social inequalities produced by AI, and the opportunities, risks and threats it can present.

> **Encourage critical views on AI and listen to children and adolescents who have strong critical views.**

5. While some had elementary views on AI, a few had distinctly sophisticated and complex understandings of AI.

In each of the workshops, a few participants had limited exposure to AI technologies, and an elementary understanding of AI. Many however, reflected on their regular engagement with AI systems and some of these participants revealed complex and sophisticated understandings of AI in ways that were unexpected.

> **Create more opportunities to learn about the technical aspects of AI and involve those who may already have a complex understanding of AI to participate actively.**

6. Many believe that parents have a crucial role to play to mitigate risks.

Across all workshops, participants thought that parents have to be made aware of AI and can play a crucial, informed role in mitigating the risks for their children. While some suggested that parental controls over children's engagement with AI should be allowed, others thought that parents could also invade their privacy. Many felt that parents could help to empower children in their use of AI.

> **Create AI awareness programmes for parents that also involve adolescents and younger children.**

7. Some believed they had agency to confront AI risks and opportunities as individuals. Others also believed that they could act collectively to confront risks posed by AI.

While in some cases, participants felt that software engineers and parents can do more to manage risks posed by AI, many also mentioned actions that they could take as individuals to mitigate risks. Others also considered that collective youth action could involve engaging companies and governments to address risks posed by AI.

> **Raise balanced awareness among children and adolescents about the concrete advantages and opportunities presented by AI.**

8. Many had uncritical views about AI, but some held strong critical views.

Not all adolescent participants were familiar with digital technologies and AI systems. Some had never heard of AI. However, they were able to participate meaningfully in discussions on AI and its current and future implications for adolescents.

> **Don't underestimate children's ability to engage on AI-related issues, even though they are not AI experts.**

2.0 /

Adolescent Views on AI

<2.1>
What is meant by AI?

When asked what comes to mind when they hear the term "AI", most adolescent participants across all workshops referred to science fiction. The Terminator, the Matrix, the Iron Man, Robots, Mark 50, and Ultron were popular examples. They also mentioned voice assistants (Siri, Alexa, Google Assistant). Brazilian participants referred to artificially intelligent banking applications such as BIA, introduced by Bradesco, a Brazilian bank. They also mentioned Aurea, a shop assistant app linked to a retail company in Brazil called Magazine Luiza.

"AI is a computer program that is programmed to think and mimic human behaviour."

VOICES OF YOUTH, AI WORKSHOP, JOHANNESBURG

At one extreme, some adolescents in Manaus, Brazil had never heard of AI. However, the participants in New York were exposed to many technologies underpinned by AI yet could not always differentiate between technologies that are powered by AI and those that are not. In South Africa, most of the participants described AI as computers that could do things that people do. At the same time, some appeared to have a limited understanding as they referred to examples that did not qualify as AI.

AI was referred to as machines that can talk, according to participants in the workshop in Umeå, Sweden. According to participants in São Paulo, AI could augment and enhance human capabilities. They also referred to humans as flawed beings, susceptible to racism, and said that AI could enable more positive human attributes.

"We can't see how AI could have conscience, but maybe it will happen when neural networks will be really advanced. AI will take its own decisions and act on its own. It will have self-determination."

VOICES OF YOUTH, AI WORKSHOP, CHILE

A more sophisticated AI concept was revealed through references to AI functionality and capability compared with human capability. In Chile, most participants agreed that AI requires a lot of data to work properly, while a few were aware that some AI systems can work with small data sets, citing as examples "small neural networks" and "simple motion sensors".

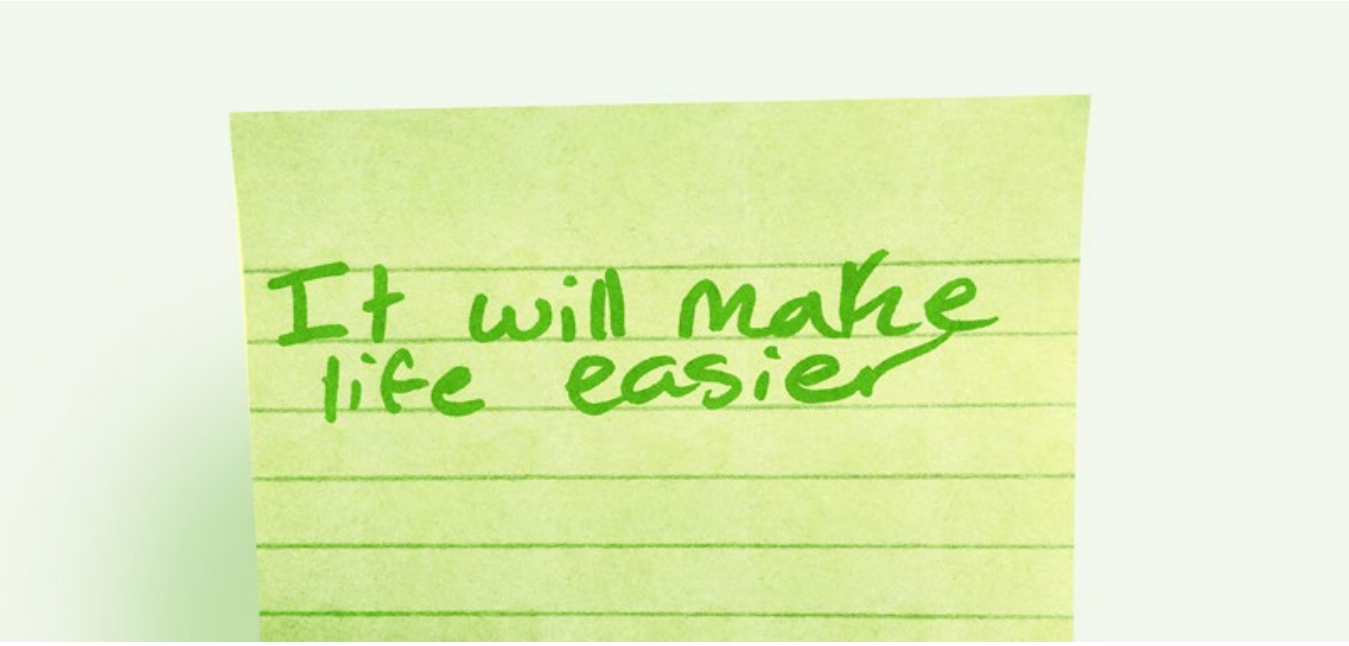
In the Chilean workshops, participants were enthusiastic about the idea that AI systems can use the data fed to it by humans to influence more efficient predictions and outcomes. This view connected with those who said that they would submit their data to an AI system in order to train it to learn and produce improved outcomes.

A key issue that raised animated debate in all of the virtual Chilean workshops was the response to whether AI has a conscience. Most participants conceded that AI could not have a conscience but considered this to be a possibility in the future.

<2.2>
What opportunities are presented by AI?

Across all workshops, participants agreed that AI presents opportunities for humanity. They highlighted how AI capability could:

- Enable criminals to be recognized and tracked;
- Reduce the costs of processes that would be more expensive if performed by humans;
- Get things done faster;
- Better diagnose illnesses;
- Help them improve school grades;
- Support humanitarian aid;
- Reduce time-consuming tasks; and
- Substitute routine tasks.



"A lot of people will be helped by this technology like people who are old or blind."

VOICES OF YOUTH, AI WORKSHOP, JOHANNESBURG

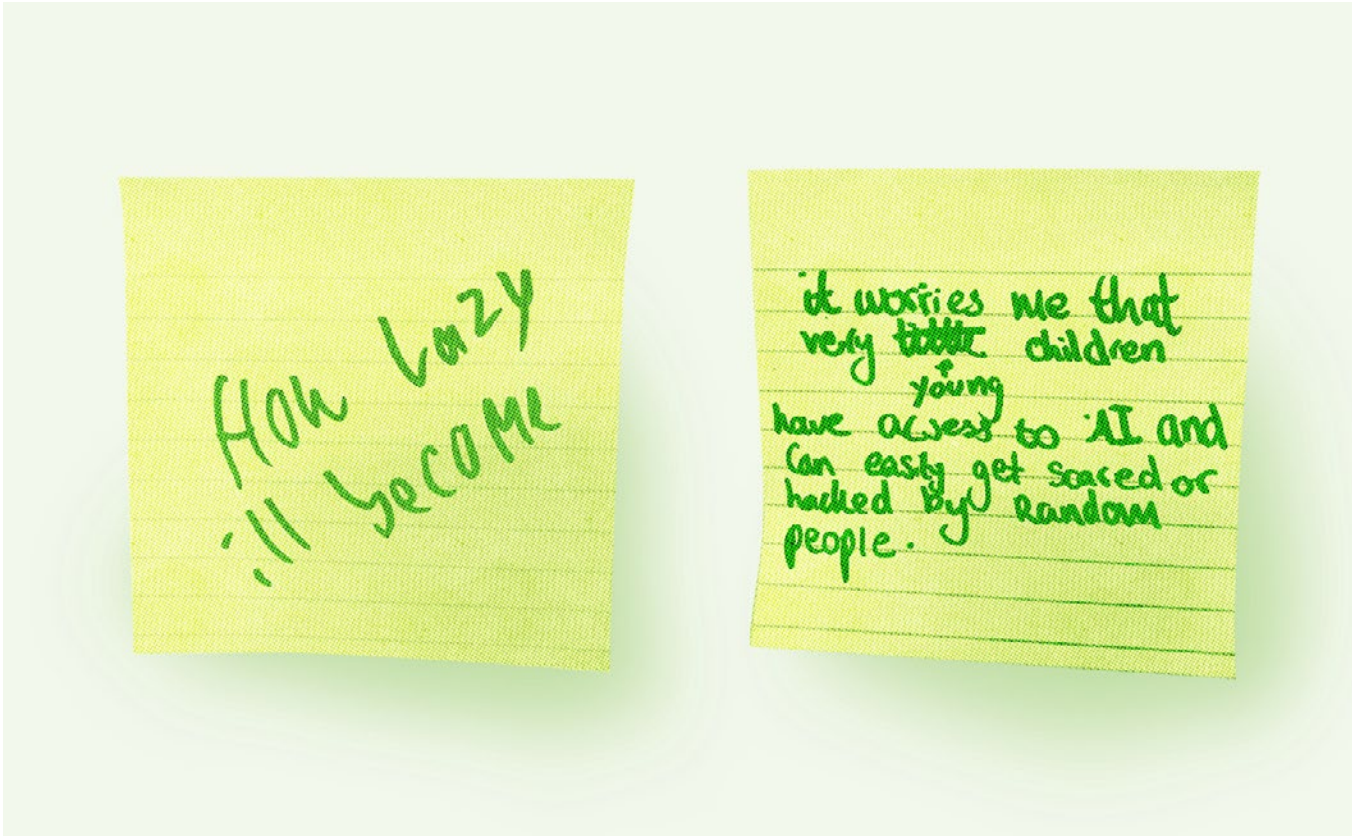
However, differences of opinion about the opportunities presented by AI arose in the São Paulo and New York workshops. In the São Paulo workshop, participants referred more to potential future benefits, rather than actual current benefits that humanity could derive. In New York, participants believed that AI would make humans lazier. However, they conceded that it could lead to more efficient use of time and energy.

<2.3>
What risks are posed by AI?

The following were among the key concerns that were raised about AI:

- Infringements on data privacy;
- Personal data leaks or hacking;
- Personal data misuse;
- Reinforcing racial and gender biases in AI;
- The risk of exposure to scams especially through accessing personal data;
- In the health sector, the risk of misdiagnosis can arise under the influence of incorrect information;
- AI could exacerbate rising unemployment;
- AI could make the world more unequal by benefitting those who are already wealthy;
- The risk of losing human connection between people; and
- The lack of clear boundaries and safeguards about AI use by adolescents.

Across all workshops, participants revealed varied understandings of the risks posed by AI. While a few demonstrated an awareness of risk, the majority showed either a naïve understanding or none at all.



For example, some participants talked openly about providing personal and private data about themselves when downloading an app, without acknowledging the potential consequences of doing so. In São Paulo, some participants also believed that the concerning aspects of AI could be circumvented. This view stemmed from a belief that they can choose which information they make available when engaging with an AI system.

"There is no way to know where this information is going... We have no way of knowing how they use it, nor knowing what happens next with this information...I think it is stored, right?"

VOICES OF YOUTH, AI WORKSHOP, JOHANNESBURG

At the same time, when they were sent targeted advertisements about products that they had not searched for, those with seemingly uncritical matter-of-fact views also expressed an awareness of the predictive capabilities of AI. In all the workshops participants provided lists of possible risks associated with being online and suggested that a degree of caution and safer strategies are needed for more secure engagement with online spaces and AI systems.

<2.4>
Who should take responsibility for AI?

Participants gave diverse responses on who should take responsibility for adolescents' safe and secure use of AI. Some believed that those who create and design AI technologies, such as software engineers, hackers, researchers and 'experts' should be held responsible for producing AI technologies ethically and for ensuring their ethical use. This view was emphasised by participants in the Manaus workshop.

In the Umeå workshop in Sweden, many believed that parents should take responsibility to educate their children because they supply them with devices and internet access at home. Notably, in New York and Umeå participants also recognised that they too should learn to be responsible and safe AI users.

"Companies should engage adolescents as primary users in the design or feedback on the technology."

VOICES OF YOUTH, AI WORKSHOP, UMEÅ

Many expressed awareness that companies sell data to third parties and that as a result, companies should also shoulder responsibility for the safe use of their AI-powered products.

While governments did not always feature prominently, a few participants in South Africa highlighted the responsibility that governments hold regarding the use of AI by their citizens.

Some participants reflected their social awareness about the ways in which AI could catalyse deepening inequalities. In Chile, participants expressed concern about the inherent gender biases of the algorithms that serve to perpetuate gender inequality. In the same vein, Chilean participants also expressed concern that racial and class inequality could be reinforced by AI, thereby emphasising the need for citizens to hold AI designers accountable.

<2.5>
What support is needed to better understand AI?

Each of the workshops discussed the support that adolescents would need to better understand and engage with AI systems. A range of valuable responses emerged, from wanting to learn how to design and produce artificially intelligent technologies to working out how best to ensure that AI is safe for children and young people. Some believed that introducing it as a school subject will open up avenues for children and adolescents to design AI in their best interests, while others argued strongly for better policies that can defend human rights through the design, production and use of AI.

"I would like to take a more critical look at new technologies involving AI and know how to distinguish what is good and what is not."

VOICES OF YOUTH, AI WORKSHOP, SÃO PAOLO

3.0 /

AI Workshop Design and Experience

UNICEF closely documented the workshops to improve their design for replication at future workshop engagements with younger children and adolescents. Between January and July 2020, 245 adolescents aged 12–19 years, from five countries, participated in workshops conducted in four different languages, held by UNICEF's Office of Global Insight and Policy and Division of Communication, UNICEF's Country Offices and their local partners. The workshops were designed to discuss the knowledge of and views on AI of the adolescent participants, their exposure to AI, and their insights about how to achieve an AI-powered world based on all children's rights, including those of adolescents.

Through their local offices, UNICEF approached various partner organizations who helped to source adolescent participation at the workshops. The table below provides an overview of attendance in each of the five countries.

{Workshop Participation in Five Countries }

	New York, USA	**Manaus Brazil**	**Johannesburg, South Africa**	**São Paulo, Brazil**	**Umeå, Sweden**	**Chile, (16 regions)**
Date	15 January, 2020	20 February, 2020	22 February, 2020	11 March, 2020	28 April, 2020	20-23 July, 2020
Workshop	Face-to-face	Face-to-face	Face-to-face	Face-to-face	Face-to-face	Virtual
N° of participants	9	22	15	20	26	153[1]
Age	13-14	12-19	13-17	13-17	14-15	13-17
Language	English	Portuguese	English	Portuguese	Swedish	Spanish

[1]In Chile the workshops were held with adolescents from 16 different regions. The gender breakdown of the participants was 58 per cent girls, 38 per cent boys, 2 per cent other, 2 per cent prefer not to answer.

UNICEF designed the workshop methodology. Materials include a manual and workshop template, which can be tailored flexibly to suit various local contexts.

Two workshop formats emerged over time, including a face-to-face workshop format planned for all participating countries. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the Chilean workshop adopted a virtual format which consequently enabled the organizers to reach a larger number of adolescents from 16 regions in Chile.

<3.1>
Face-to-face workshops

A range of participatory methods enabling children and adolescents to express themselves comfortably in face-to-face workshop environments, were applied. These include the following:

Mapping my digital footprint: The purpose of mapping participants' digital footprints was to allow them to reflect more generally on their digital use before moving onto the subject of AI. This exercise made visible the high levels of exposure to and interaction with AI and digital technologies in the daily lives of a number of participants. However, a few of the 245 adolescents had little or no regular contact with digital technologies and AI, particularly in Manaus, Brazil.

Brief presentations: Each workshop included an introductory presentation about the key features of AI to ensure that all participants had some basic

knowledge before engaging them with initial thought-provoking questions and group discussions on different case studies.

Case studies: In each of the workshops, the facilitators chose a series of case studies for group discussions based on their relevance to the respective country contexts. Participants were divided into groups at each workshop, with each assigned a case study of an artificially intelligent app or platform. These case studies included:

- A health chatbot available on a popular health website, that can help diagnose what is wrong when someone is not feeling well;
- A facial recognition application used for a school security system;
- A study app that can support learners by identifying precise topics where they are under-performing in a subject and where they need to improve their studies;
- The ethical obligation of AI-enabled home assistants to report cases of suspected bullying that might arise when a child experiences harassment or bullying;
- A job recruitment app that supports companies by filtering the data of all job applicants and choosing the top candidates for the job; and
- An AI-driven university admission platform that selected students based on a particular set of criteria.

The groups discussed particular themes related to each case, such as:

- Positive aspects of the case study;
- Concerns and risks related to the case study; and
- Who were the responsible parties behind the respective case study apps, bots or platforms.

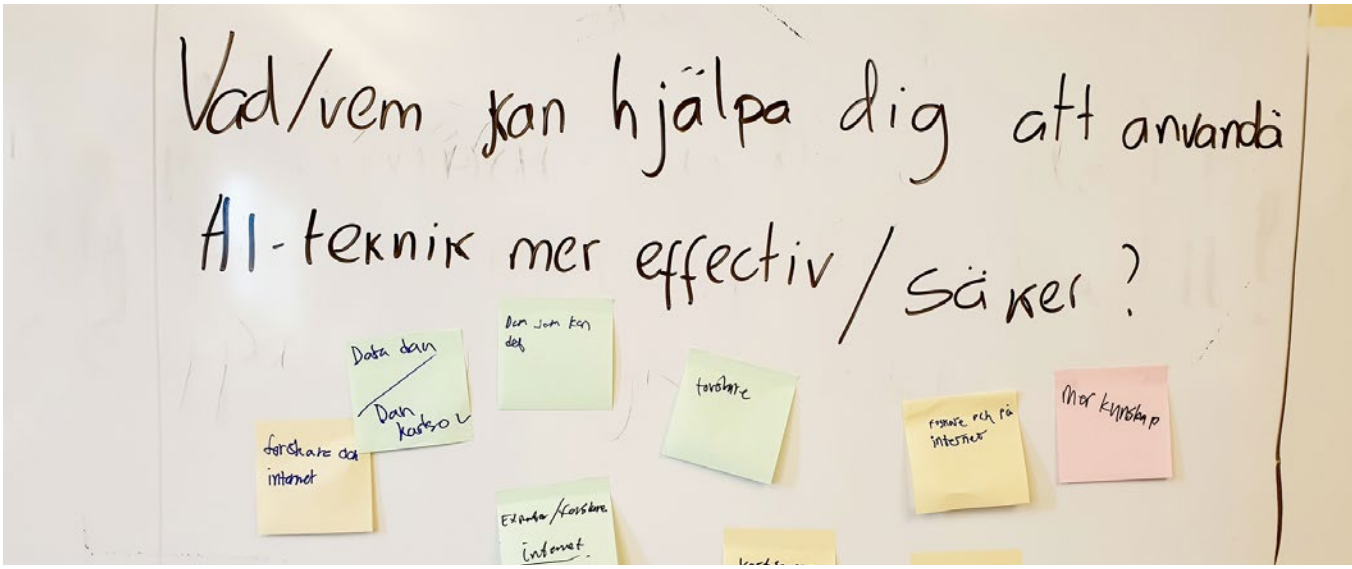
Plenary questions for discussion: Workshop participants were asked a series of questions and were required to write their replies on post-its. These were stuck onto a wall and then grouped into themes, thus providing a basis for discussion. Questions included:

- What comes to mind when someone says 'AI'?
- What is exciting about AI?
- What worries you about AI?
- What would you like to know or understand more about AI?
- What do you think can be done to make AI better for adolescents?
- Who/what could help you use AI technology better and safely?

All face-to-face workshops were recorded via note-taking and audio recording while the virtual workshops in Chile were recorded via the Zoom platform.

<3.2>
Virtual workshops

The workshops in Chile assumed an online format via Zoom, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the workshops ended up reaching a larger number of adolescents from a wider range of areas. The online workshop took place each day for 2 hours over four days and included a poll for plenary discussion; break-out rooms where participants discussed case studies of adolescents AI use, opportunities and challenges; and a survey where the participants could express their concerns and excitement about AI. Poll questions such as "Does AI have a conscience?" were posed for participants to answer. The facilitators also used video stories to elicit responses from adolescent participants.



<3.3>
Pre-workshop preparation

Training sessions with facilitators. Pre-workshop training sessions were held with facilitators and covered ethics and safety, norms during the workshops, crisis management, methodologies and contents. A toolkit for facilitators was designed so that they would have all necessary information and materials at hand. These included links to UNICEF's courses on Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) and Introduction to Ethics in Evidence Generation, an orientation guide for facilitators and facilitator notes, including safeguarding and workshop rules.

Arranging ethical clearance for adolescent participation. All workshops included pre-workshop activities to ensure that informed consent forms were provided by the adolescents and their parents.

4.0 /

Learning from the Workshop Process

<4.1>

What worked well?

Online workshops enabled wider reach and larger participant numbers

For the facilitators of the Chilean workshops, the unexpected delivery of an online format enabled the participation of many adolescents across a wider expanse of regions and areas. They registered 169 participants, of whom 153 took part. The facilitators were surprised by the extent of the webinars' reach and believed that UNICEF should consider organizing more webinars with adolescents to extend involvement to large numbers of young people.

A mix of approaches to enable participation by all

Others believed that the use of an official poll and post-its as part of an offline poll, offered a mix of approaches which allowed all participants to vote and respond to questions. They also made it possible for those who were shy, or who did not want to speak up, to participate. This was evident in the survey results of the polls in which the adolescents participated.

Local language facilitation increased participation

Facilitating in local languages in Brazil, Chile and Sweden was very important, allowing adolescents to participate meaningfully and actively. In Manaus, it was very encouraging that adolescents from non-indigenous communities could interact with adolescents from indigenous communities.

Case studies of AI applications helped make the topic tangible

The interviewed facilitators indicated that the case studies worked very well because the approach enabled active participation in smaller groups. The case study format makes the abstract topic of AI tangible in the form of real-world applications. The format also makes it easier for adolescents to think through the ethical issues raised by AI systems, such as fairness and inclusion.

A flexible global workshop template allowed for local adaptation

The methodology was designed at a global, overarching level but could be applied flexibly and in contextually appropriate ways at local levels. The

facilitators involved also considered this an advantage. For example, in Manaus, adolescents from the indigenous communities composed songs and danced and were willing to share their experiences. Their involvement in this way made the workshop a fun experience for everyone.

AI experts helped to dive deeper into the topic

In the case of the Chilean workshops, having an AI expert present to explain complex concepts and clarify complex questions, proved to be very welcome for many adolescents.

<4.2>
What can be improved?

A facilitator who participated in the Swedish workshop, felt that it would have been valuable if a dedicated facilitator had been assigned to each group during the group break-out sessions in the face-to-face workshops. The workshops in the other four countries had assigned dedicated facilitators to break-out groups.

Appendix: Voices of Youth

< What excites me about AI? >

"How it can be used to accelerate the evolutionary process of humanity or to improve the behaviour of our species and thus have a better quality of life."

AI WORKSHOP, CHILE

"That it could help us develop more careers and give more employment possibilities, as well as help in people's daily lives, such as in education, health and transport."

AI WORKSHOP, CHILE

"AI might be able to predict some types of natural disasters and we'll be able to evacuate people out of an area before it happens. And AI might also help us come up with solutions to humanitarian issues."

AI WORKSHOP, JOHANNESBURG

"What excites me about AI technology is the day when we can make life-size robots and ships to travel us to different planets in the solar system."

AI WORKSHOP, NEW YORK

< What worries me about AI? >

"I am afraid that what happened in the movie Matrix (or something less macabre) will happen, where machines develop awareness and dominate the planet, being more powerful and intelligent than people."

AI WORKSHOP, SÃO PAULO

"I am personally concerned that, while they are unlikely to make decisions based on hate, they may make them in an unethical and/or immoral way, so they may not make the decisions that a human being would probably be inclined to make."

AI WORKSHOP, CHILE

"I am concerned about the amount of data that AI can access, the threats to which we are exposed and the lack of testing with gender parity, that can produce misogynist, racist, classist and adult-centred biases, among others."

AI WORKSHOP, CHILE

"That it will make most people not use their abilities. Increased unemployment especially in developing countries."

AI WORKSHOP, JOHANNESBURG

"That my free will ("fria vilja" in Swedish) and personal space are destroyed/disappear ("förstörs/försvinner" in Swedish)."

AI WORKSHOP, UMEÅ

"With AI you can be more lazy."

AI WORKSHOP, UMEÅ

< What support do adolescents need to understand AI better? >

"I would like to take a more critical look at new technologies involving AI and know-how to distinguish what is good and what is not."

AI WORKSHOP, SÃO PAULO

"I'd like to know how much they know about me."

AI WORKSHOP, NEW YORK

"I would like to know more about the dangers associated so that I can make good decisions when using it."

AI WORKSHOP, JOHANNESBURG

"The functioning behind the intelligence applications in daily life, etc."

AI WORKSHOP, CHILE

"How to have safer use of AI."

AI WORKSHOP, MANAUS

"Can AI be controlled?"

AI WORKSHOP, UMEÅ

< How can we make AI better for adolescents? >

"That they should teach adolescents and young people about the risks and virtues of using artificial intelligence, so that they can be more confident about their personal information. There should be talks in schools, or advertising (which is very influential) that informs or persuades us to know more and be protected on our own. Let it be assimilated into our culture, so that people understand it as commonly as we know the notion of electricity and doors; technology."

AI WORKSHOP, CHILE

"First of all, take the time to get to know adolescents, because we are all aware of the intergenerational difference that occurs in two completely different childhoods. After that, assuming that a 13-year-old child probably knows more about some issues than an adult who is 50 years old today when he or she was 13, it is time to stop infantilising young people and start developing technologies that are more focused on new generations, since these are the adults of tomorrow."

AI WORKSHOP, CHILE

"Many adolescents use the internet several times a day. So, let the parents know everything they do."

AI WORKSHOP, SÃO PAULO

"[Adolescents] should be taught about it, should also be mentored basically on how they can use them and they could have skills or even knowledge."

AI WORKSHOP, JOHANNESBURG

"Do what we did today. Education."

AI WORKSHOP, UMEÅ

< Whose responsibility is it to make AI better for adolescents? >

"The AI itself or its creator with proper instructions and recommendations, in addition to full transparency."

AI WORKSHOP, SÃO PAULO

"I think a computer scientist. This is very complex."

AI WORKSHOP, SÃO PAULO

"Scientists, developers, doctors in IT, people in general who have studied a lot about AI."

AI WORKSHOP, SÃO PAULO

"YouTubers and experts."

AI WORKSHOP, MANAUS

"Companies create AI technology can educate me and other young people on how to use AI more safely."

WORKSHOP, JOHANNESBURG

"My parents, guardians, trusted adults."

AI WORKSHOP, JOHANNESBURG

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