|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Document CWG-COP-22/INF/19** |
| **31 January 2025** |
| **English only** |
|  |  |
| Contribution by Bahamas (Commonwealth of the), Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States and Caribbean Telecommunications Union | |
| UPDATE ON CHILD ONLINE PROTECTION INITIATIVES IN THE CARIBBEAN | |
| **Purpose**  The purpose of this document is to provide an update on child online protection initiatives being undertaken in the Caribbean in line with Resolution 179 (Rev. Bucharest, 2022) of the Plenipotentiary Conference. This document will focus on initiatives being undertaken by the Caribbean Telecommunications Union, The Bahamas and the Eastern Caribbean. It will also highlight existing challenges with advancing child online protecting strategies in the region generally.  **Action required**  This report is transmitted to the Council Working Group on child online protection **for information** and **consideration**.  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  **References**  *Resolution* [*179 (Rev. Bucharest, 2022)*](https://www.itu.int/en/council/Documents/basic-texts-2023/RES-179-E.pdf) *of the Plenipotentiary Conference on ITU's role in child online protection;* [*CWG-COP website*](https://www.itu.int/en/council/cwg-cop/Pages/default.aspx)*;* [*ITU-D Cybersecurity - COP*](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Cybersecurity/Pages/COP/COP.aspx)*;* [*OECS COP Policy and Strategic Framework*](https://oecs.int/en/our-work/knowledge/library/education/oecs-policy-and-strategic-framework-for-child-online-protection-cop-in-the-oecs) | |

Introduction

As a region characterized by island nations and remote communities, connectivity has remained a priority for national governments. Prioritization of connectivity in the region has created the opportunity for young persons (including children) to increasingly engage online as a necessity in modern society via computers, tablets, smartphones, and the like. Along with the benefits of increased connectivity, Caribbean countries are also faced with the challenge of ensuring our youth can participate in online activities in a safe and secure manner. Some Caribbean countries have progressively been undertaking initiatives to protect youth in various online forums.

More recently, given increasing cyber threats and rising cases of cyberbullying and online exploitation, Caribbean governments are acknowledging the need for a multi-stakeholder collaborative approach to develop and implement national strategies and address legislative and institutional gaps to deal with this very important public policy issue.

This document and its accompanying presentation provide an update on the child online protection strategies and activities at the regional level, supported by the Caribbean Telecommunications Union (CTU). It also delves into the activities being conducted by a few CTU member countries, including The Bahamas and the region represented by the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS).

Child online protection-related initiatives by the Caribbean Telecommunications Union

The CTU has been an active contributor to the Caribbean-wide public policy efforts to combat abuses against children in the online environment, particularly with respect to online child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAM) in the region. Through its collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the CTU has facilitated capacity-building initiatives for policymakers, regulators, and law enforcement, ensuring they are equipped with the necessary knowledge and tools to address CSAM. By advocating for harmonized legislative and regulatory frameworks, the CTU promotes a coordinated regional response, aligning Caribbean policies with international best practices.

Additionally, the CTU supports the integration of cybersecurity and child protection measures into national ICT policies, encouraging digital safety initiatives such as filtering technologies and secure digital identity systems. It plays a crucial role in multi-stakeholder engagement, bringing together governments, law enforcement agencies, telecommunications providers, and civil society to strengthen regional efforts against CSAM. Through these initiatives, the CTU helps shape public policy and reinforces the Caribbean’s commitment to combating online child exploitation.

CTU is also supportive of the Get Safe Online campaign that has seen several Caribbean countries, including The Bahamas, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and Antigua and Barbuda, implement online resources to combat this issue. The Get Safe Online initiative can significantly support the Caribbean in addressing child online protection challenges by providing education, awareness, and practical cybersecurity guidance to parents, educators, and young internet users. Through its localized platform, it offers free, accessible resources on online safety, including how to recognize and prevent risks such as online grooming, cyberbullying, and exposure to harmful content. By partnering with governments and stakeholders, the initiative helps strengthen digital literacy and responsible internet use, aligning with broader efforts to create a safer online environment for children across the Caribbean.

Child online protection initiatives in The Bahamas

In 2021, with the support of the ITU, the Government of The Bahamas initiated the process of establishing a National Computer Incident Response Team (CIRT-BS) and a National Cybersecurity Strategy (NCS) as part of an IDB-funded digital transformation project. The strategy, approved by the Government in 2024, defines the responsibility of CIRT-BS and relevant ministries to develop cybersecurity tools and curricula.

For example, the country has already committed to embedding **cybersecurity education** inits national curriculum, which helps raise awareness among children, parents, and educators about online risks. Additionally, The Royal Bahamas Police Force Cyber Crime Unit has undergone specialized training to handle cybercrimes targeting minors, building institutional capacity to investigate online exploitation and abuse cases effectively. The NCS, however, does not currently address cyberbullying, grooming, and child data privacy.

In The Bahamas, child online protection, like cybersecurity, has been recognized as a whole-of-society concern requiring collaboration, dedication, and active participation from all sectors of society. As a result, and again with the support of the ITU, the CIRT-BS recently undertook a preliminary situational analysis and gap assessment of the child online protection framework in the country.

A stakeholder analysis identified civil society, public institutions, children, parents, and industry (Internet Service Providers and social media creators) as having a role in promoting and ensuring COP. Civil society initiatives complement ongoing government efforts to identify and address gaps and raise awareness through training programs, advocacy campaigns, and collaborations with international organizations.

The existing legal framework was assessed to have a low to medium maturity with base-level protection for children online. The exercise revealed the inclusion of basic cyber-hygiene in elementary and junior high school curricula but weak legal protections against emerging online threats. The need for technical capacity building, greater inter-agency coordination, and improved international cooperation was also noted.

A preliminary draft COP policy and action plan has also been prepared, and initial stakeholder consultations are ongoing. The draft policy will be refined through a series of stakeholder consultations and informed by a more in-depth study to validate preliminary findings. Stakeholders will include government agencies, civil society, educational institutions, industry representatives, parents, and children. Through a series of consultation workshops, criteria for prioritization will be developed, consensus built, and activities prioritized for action planning.

A steering committee of experts will provide the leadership, expertise, and coordination needed to develop an effective and comprehensive policy and advise the Government on the legislative and institutional changes that will be needed. A coordinated national public awareness campaign will be critical in ensuring community buy-in, support for any resultant policy or legislation, and a deeper understanding of the symptoms of online predatory practices across the age spectrum.

Child online protection initiatives in the Eastern Caribbean (OECS Region)

With support from the ITU and UNICEF, the OECS Commission released its Policy and Strategic Framework for Child Online Protection (COP) in the OECS in May 2022. This comprehensive policy and strategic framework was prepared in response to the increased threat of physical, emotional, and social harms faced by youth since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to internet-based learning modalities.

The policy provides a framework covering nine (9) countries in the Eastern Caribbean: Antigua and Barbuda, the Commonwealth of Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, the British Virgin Islands, and Anguilla; all recognized as SIDS. The policy framework provides guidelines to the Ministries of Education and Ministries responsible for ICT in the respective OECS Member Countries to facilitate the protection of youth and children in online environments.

Early in the development of the COP policy for the region, diagnostic studies identified several challenges, including:

– general lack of supervision for children’s online activity,

– increasing cyberbullying reports,

– growing harmful online content,

– limited or no privacy, and

– a lack of awareness of local laws addressing COP issues.

To address these challenges, the policy framework and accompanying child online protection strategy proposes that Member Countries do the following, among other things:

– establish governance and institutional framework via the creation of a multistakeholder group,

– strengthen the legal and regulatory environment by reviewing and updating national laws to align with international COP standards,

– capacity building and training of stakeholders supported by public awareness and educational campaigns,

– establish protocols for reporting and responding to online threats along with relevant monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and

– integrate COP mechanisms into the national educational curriculum at primary and secondary levels.

Implementation challenges

Online predators are employing more sophisticated methods to circumvent existing online protections. Governments must, therefore, keep pace and be able to respond quickly to nefarious technology advancements. As such, it is important to acknowledge challenges that impact the pace at which national child online protection strategies are being advanced in the Caribbean so that appropriate solutions can be designed to support Member States who may need them. Challenges include:

– limited funding, human capacity, and competing national priorities,

– fragmented institutional and legal frameworks, and

– time-consuming bureaucratic policy and legislative processes, exacerbated by the cyclical nature of political transitions, often pose challenges in maintaining momentum for long-term strategic initiatives.

Conclusions and key takeaways

While advancements in technology have improved connectivity in Small Island Development States (SIDS), allowing for improved delivery of health, education, and other services to remote communities, it also presents risks, particularly to youth, when not properly monitored. Post-COVID-19, with increased reliance on the Internet for communication and service delivery, Caribbean countries have found their youth more susceptible to threats of physical, emotional, and social harm in the online environment. While many Caribbean countries have developed COP strategies to combat these challenges, implementation challenges, particularly in the areas of limited funding and fragmented frameworks for implementation, continue to pose challenges that are being overcome on a country-by-country basis. Hence, greater efforts will be placed on regional cooperation and harmonization of policies and strategies within the Caribbean Community, through institutions such as the CTU.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_