



Thanks to Berkman and UNICEF. And thanks to EU Kids Online – a network of 33 national research teams, centred on Europe, researching children’s online opportunities and risks to inform policy development in the European Commission’s Better Internet for Kids programme.

The idea for this seminar began when I was here last fall and Berkman kindly hosted the launch of my report with Monica Bulger for UNICEF’s Office of Research.



A Global Agenda for Children's Rights in the Digital Age  
Recommendations for Developing UNICEF's Research Strategy

Professor Sonia Livingstone  
Dr. Monica E. Bulger  
September 2013



"Before they will make any changes in policy or practice, lots of different interests will ask 'Where's the evidence, where's the data?'"

So, absolutely, I think research is vitally important, particularly in the developing world."

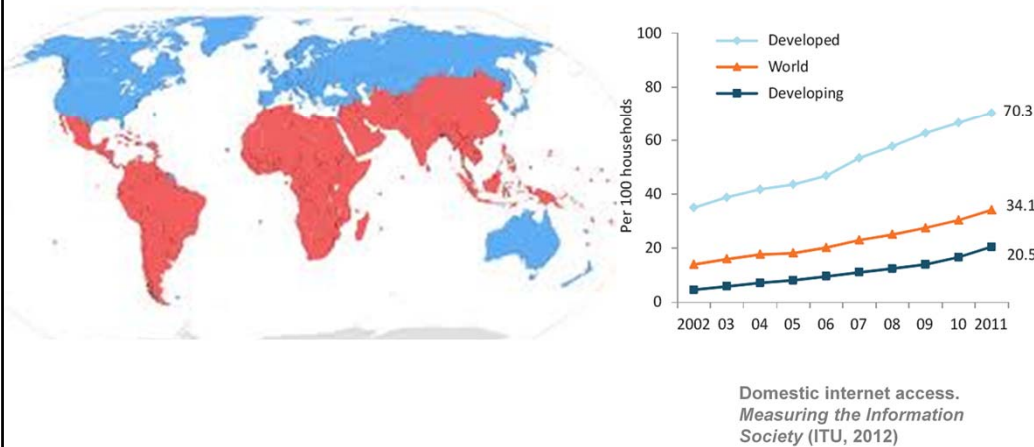
(John Carr, eNACSO and ECPAT)

In that report, we examined the research agenda needed by policy makers and practitioners to ensure that children now going online around the world get the optimal benefits while minimising the risks.

As this quote from John Carr illustrates, the call for evidence by stakeholders is strong.

Our report drew on three main sources of knowledge:

## Most research in Global North



the extensive body of research produced in the Global North – mainly Europe and North America;

the sparse but growing body of research produced in the Global South – vital since the graph shows that the number of households gaining access is growing significantly.

(As the UN puts it, “The term “North” refers to the more developed regions or developed countries and the term “South” refers to the less developed regions or developing countries... These terms are used for statistical convenience and do not necessarily express a judgment about the stage reached by a particular country or area in the development process.)

## Call for evidence in the South

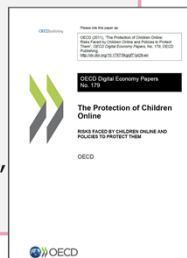


"Quantitative, analytical and comparative studies are rare and not necessarily focused on children..."

The current understanding of the prevalence of risk is ... largely based on a limited number of well-researched countries.

Risk prevalence varies and further comparative research would help to understand factors which influence differences among countries."

(OECD, 2011)



"There is a lot of extrapolation in terms of the way that children use online engagement in western countries and how they use them in developing countries..."

So there are specificities that are lost when research is not sufficiently contextualised, which is important."

(Keshet Bachan, Plan International)

(3) Third, we invited the experiences of educators, welfare practitioners and policy makers working in international and development organisations and facing new challenges as children gain mobile and internet access in their part of the world.

Today I'll build on the findings of that report to move the discussion forward. My purpose is to raise questions about what the research agenda could and should be. As I hope will become clear, defining this agenda has consequences for defining the policy agenda.

What we know already is that the continuously changing and fast-developing digital environment is re-shaping children's lives across the globe, for better and for worse. In the GN, the similarities across countries are generally more striking than the differences, though the differences within countries can be sizeable.

*How does this work in the GS?*

## Changing lives



GSMA | NTT DOCOMO

### Children's use of mobile phones

An international comparison 2013  
Executive Summary



#### In the UK:

- 93% 8-15 year olds have internet at home, 40% have a smartphone
- 35% own 5+ media devices, and they go online for 13 hours per week
- Nearly half use social networking, most with private settings; 72% parents set rules for mobile
- 15% 9-16 year olds were upset by something online last year

#### In Algeria, Egypt, Iraq and Saudi Arabia:

- 81% 8-18 year olds own a mobile phone, 1 in 3 owns a smartphone
- 90% of those use the camera, half use location based and social networking services
- 40% of kids have public SNS profiles, 61% parents set rules for mobile use
- Mobile is main form of internet access for 14% of those with mobile phone

The slide illustrates some of the findings, showing that already, differences across continents are not so great.

As online and mobile technologies become part of the taken-for-granted infrastructure that underpins how children learn, play, participate, work or socialise, it's getting hard to draw the line between offline and online. Almost any experience has an online dimension - through children's direct engagement with ICTs or through the operation of technologies, contents or services that affect the conditions of children's lives.

## Research questions



- How are children gaining access to and using ICT in their daily lives?
- To what extent does the use of ICT facilitate access to information, education, participation and other valued resources?
- To what extent does the use of ICT compound vulnerabilities or introduce new risks of harm to children's well-being?
- Which initiatives, policies and practices are effective in maximising the benefits and minimising the harm of ICT use?

Primarily, the research agenda developed largely in the GN has focused on four key questions:

- How are children gaining access to and using ICT in their daily lives?
- To what extent does the use of ICT enable children greater access to information, education, participation and other valued resources and opportunities?
- To what extent does the use of ICT by children compound existing vulnerabilities or introduce new risks of harm to children's well-being?
- Which initiatives, policies and practices are effective in maximising the benefits and minimising the harm for children in relation to ICT use?

*Should these questions guide research in the GS also?*

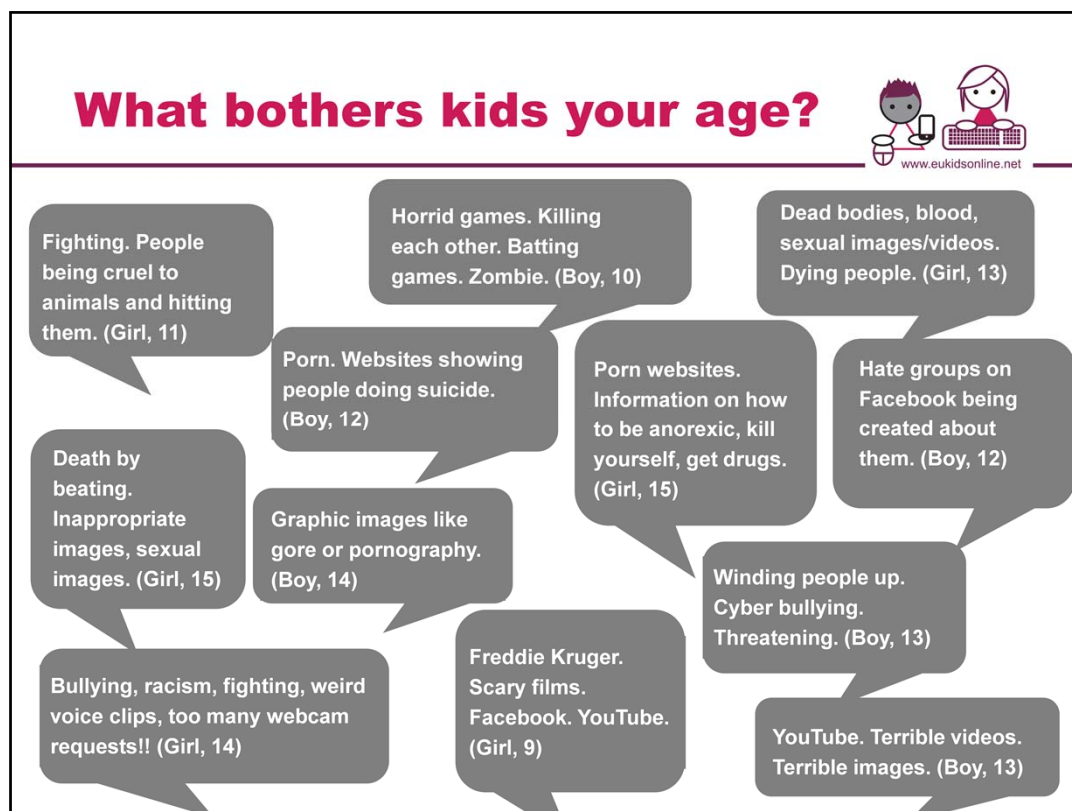




The media often set the research and policy agenda, and they highlight particular priorities in particular countries. We need to be wary of this.

Indeed, notwithstanding these media panics, over the years in which the internet reached the mass market across the GN, children's lives did not get worse— in terms of the big harms: abuse, abductions, mental illness, etc. *What do we expect to happen in the GS?*

Instead of being swayed by the media, in the EU Kids Online project we learned to listen carefully to children and what they had to say about the internet. For sure, they have lots of concerns.



This is what children in Britain told us bothered them online.

And evidence is growing that the internet is becoming part of – possibly even compounding – the offline risks and negative experiences that may harm children, such as sexual exploitation, bullying, exposure to pornography and other potentially harmful experiences. But not all risks result in harm. And some research shows how ICTs can provide tools to help children cope with the problems they encounter. Children talk positively about this too.



## Opportunities linked to risks



"Now that we are looking at a "Better internet", it's time that we looked more at the empowering aspects. And taking risks is actually becoming empowered, because once we take a risk we better understand the nature of risk and so build resilience."

(Janice Richardson, Insafe)

Indeed, research shows that online opportunities and risks are positively correlated: the more of one, the more of the other, and vice versa.

Offline – we understand this well - consider the debates about letting children cross roads or climb trees. Giving them opportunities brings risks and societies try to manage this through regulation, education and parenting.

While promoting provision and participation may also result in more risk, if we manage this well, children's exposure to a degree of risk can be the means of developing resilience (as the director of the international awareness-raising organisation says in this quote). *Are these risks too great in the GS, where safety nets may be less strong?*

In the GN, many fear this approach, instead calling for restrictions on how kids can use the internet. [I'd rather see the restrictions placed on adult abusers and other forms of exploitation than on kids, but that's more a matter of policy than research.]

What research shows is that restrictive management practices undermine children's opportunities to gain digital skills and to learn, explore and participate

online. In a digital age, this matters for their development, threatening their rights to privacy, participation, and information about identity, sexuality and health.

Complicating things further, it's getting harder to draw a neat line between risks and opportunities. Researchers are now examining the "risky opportunities" which characterise children's experiences online.

As children make new friends online, play with their presentation of self, push some relationships to breaking point, hunt out transgressive lifestyle information – it seems that they may gain new benefits, there is some amplification of familiar risks, and there are also some new risks emerging. We are not going to stop adolescents transgressing adult-imposed boundaries but we can try to understand the conditions and consequences of such actions.

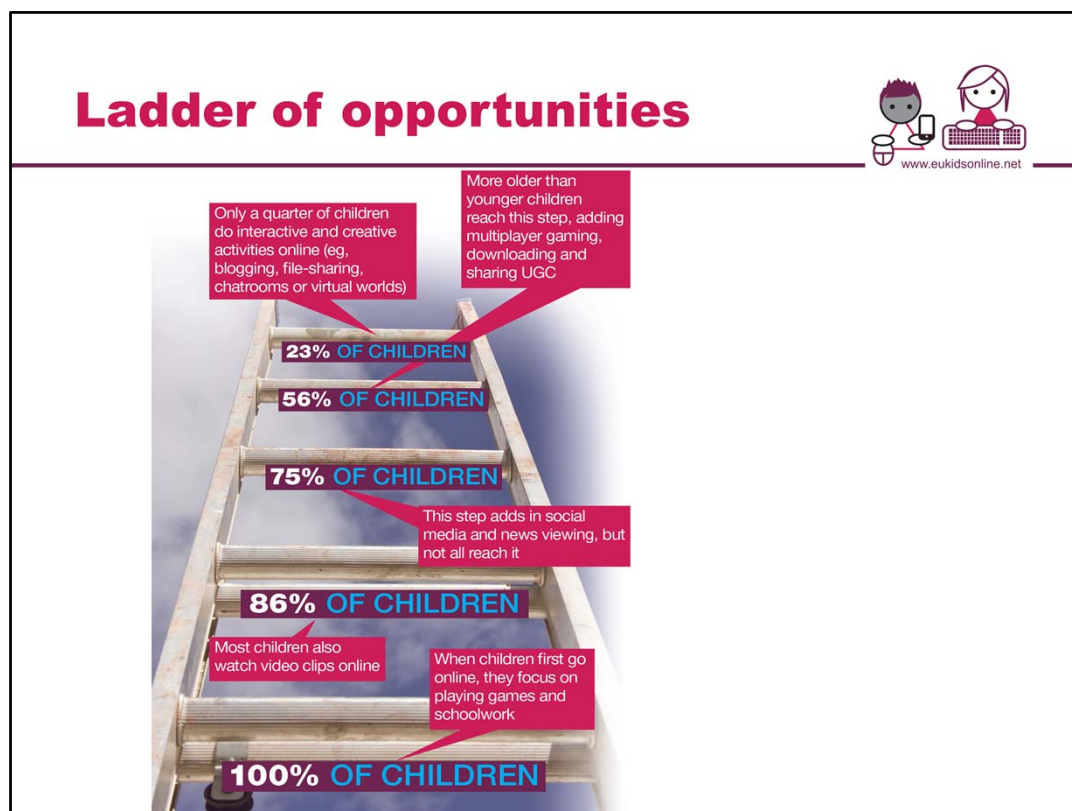
## Vulnerabilities



The converse of resilience is vulnerability, and here we have much to learn.

We know more about children's exposure to bullying or pornography than we know about its long-term effects. We have only a limited grasp of the factors that make exposure to risk more harmful for some children than others.

It does seem that the internet compounds offline vulnerabilities – so that the kids who experience difficulties or disadvantages offline are less resilient in responding to risk online. In the GS, where children often face significantly greater problems, this is surely a concern.



When it comes to the benefits of ICT, the EU Kids Online framework reveals a 'ladder of opportunities': on gaining internet access, children engage first in certain basic activities and progressively take up the more imaginative and participatory activities. But few climb far up the ladder - even among children who are well-resourced in terms of economic, educational and family circumstances.

*Does this ladder take a different form in different cultural contexts? Would you put interactive and participatory activities at the top of the ladder? What does 'good' look like? How should we balance online provision with offline provision of resources for learning, participation or play? And how can we overcome the tendency for the 'rich to get richer' whenever new resources are provided?*

I've asked a lot of questions about what the research agenda should be, as children go online worldwide. I'd like to end with two particularly difficult issues.

## Evidence-based policy or ...?



“There is nothing a Government hates more than to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult.”

(John Maynard Keynes,  
*The Times*, 11 March 1937)

“Online privacy, child safety, free speech and anonymity are on a collision course.”

(Szoka & Thierer, 2009)

First, as Keynes wryly noted, evidence is not always understood or welcome. Researchers shouldn't design a research agenda without thinking carefully about why evidence is needed: *who wants to know what and how will the results be used?* The commissioning and use of evidence is economically, culturally and politically determined, even if the evidence itself is produced according to standards of rigour, objectivity and transparency.

## ICT becoming part of daily life



But, second, evidence also embodies cultural and value assumptions. Thus we must consider who ‘we’ are – especially, how far it is helpful or even legitimate for the research agenda to apply what’s known in the Global North to the Global South. *So let’s ask, what new questions, what different problems, are pressing regarding ICT in the Global South? Does this mean new or different concepts and methods are needed?*

In our report to UNICEF, we asked *if those with expertise and resources in the GN should develop a research toolkit for projects worldwide or would that be misguided? If we do develop such a toolkit, should it focus on standardised research to maximise comparability of findings across countries? Or contextualised research to maximise interpretability of findings within a particular country?* I’ll be interested to know what you think.

As regards the first question – who wants to know what and why - many would point to the universalist framework of children’s rights as a robust basis for this multinational, multi-stakeholder deliberation. This roots us in the effort to address the fundamental needs and interests of children.



## UNCRC: 3 P's off/online



- Protection against all forms of abuse and neglect (Art. 19), incl. sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (Art. 34), and other forms of exploitation prejudicial to child's welfare (Art. 36). Protection from 'material injurious to the child's well-being' (Art. 17e), 'arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation' (Art. 16) and right of child to preserve his or her identity (Art. 8)
  - **Preventing online child abuse images, sexual grooming, online aspects of child trafficking, managing reputational risks, privacy intrusions, cyberbullying, pornography, data misuse**
- Provision to support children's rights to recreation and leisure as appropriate to their age (Art. 31), an education that will support the development of their full potential (Art. 28) and prepare them 'for responsible life in a free society' (Art. 29). Recognise 'the important function performed by the mass media' and provide diverse material of social and cultural benefit to the child (incl. minorities) to promote children's well-being (Art. 17)
  - **Provision of educational technology, online information and creative resources, digital skill development, plus diverse, stimulating public/commercial services in relevant languages**
- Participation rights: 'In all actions concerning children ... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration' (Art. 3), including the right of children to be consulted in all matters affecting them (Art. 12); see also child's freedom of expression (Art. 13) and freedom of association (Art. 15)
  - **Use ICT to include children in key societal processes, including ICT governance and uses**

In the slide, I've noted the key provisions of the UNCRC, organised according to the 3P's of protection, provision and participation. Each is already being explored in the digital age. But this journey is just beginning – *and you may wish to highlight other priorities.*

But we cannot be naïve in advocating this framework. The provisions of the UNCRC need contextual interpretation, they sometimes conflict with each other, and they are widely ignored in practice. In the digital age these are all magnified, given the fast-changing, highly complex and transnational nature of socio-technological infrastructures. Yet the framework is important in prioritising children's rights, since children are barely mentioned in most national and international efforts to encourage technological innovation and mass market provision of ICT.

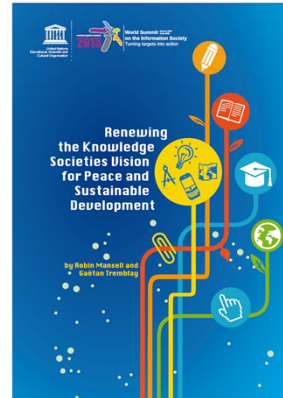
## Who are 'we'?



"There is nothing straightforward about the relationship between advances in digital technology and social transformation.

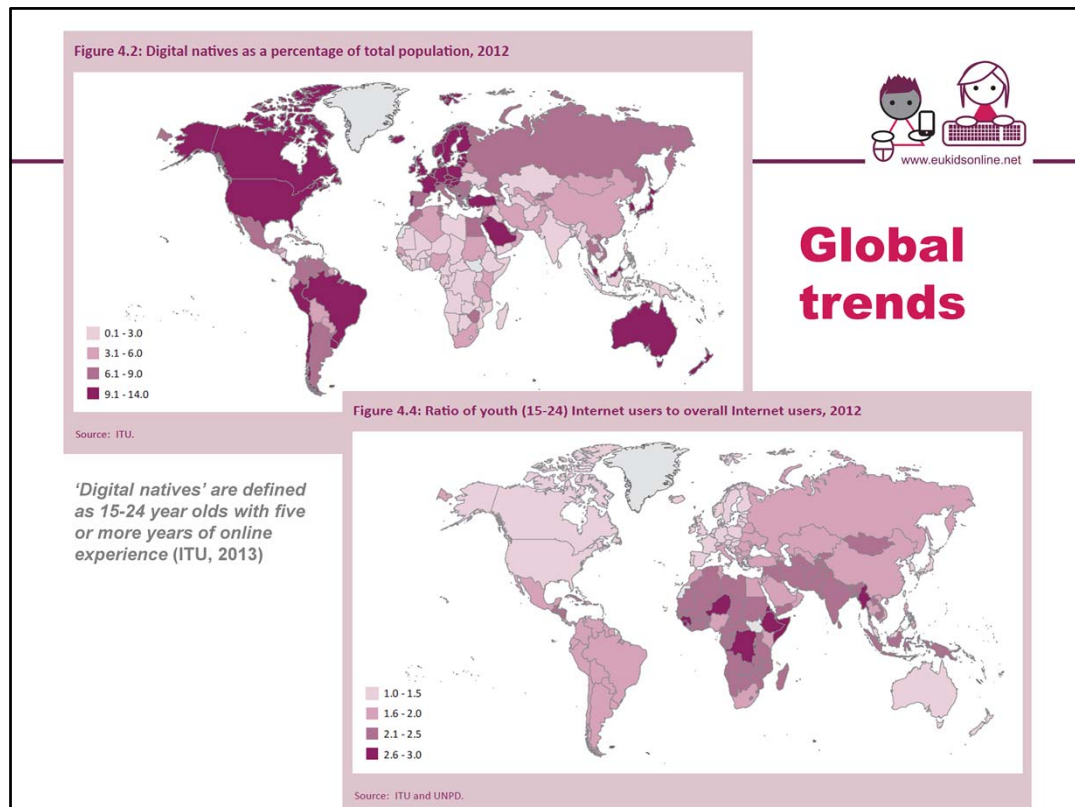
Investment in hardware and software cannot serve as a proxy for the abilities of people to make sense of their information and communication environment."

(Robin Mansell and Gaëtan Tremblay, 2013)



As regards the question of who are 'we' to take forward these deliberations – those of us from the Global North cannot simply frame the research agenda for the rest of the world. As many ICT enthusiasts, along with a host of educational and health providers have discovered, one cannot simply transplant GN technology to the GS and expect benefits to flow. The same is true for research. I say this even though our interviews for our UNICEF report, researchers, policy makers and practitioners working in diverse contexts around the world called for research expertise, baseline measures, evaluation tools and more.

So what are the key factors to consider?



ITU data give one indication of the cross-national differences. In the GN, we're studying digital natives – in the first graph, the darker shades show where there are high proportions of young people who've been online for five years or more; the rest of the world is very different. The second graph shows that in the GN, online youth are a relatively low proportion of the population, while in the GS online youth are a much higher proportion – the adults around them are not so internet-savvy. How is this important?

## Rethinking parenting

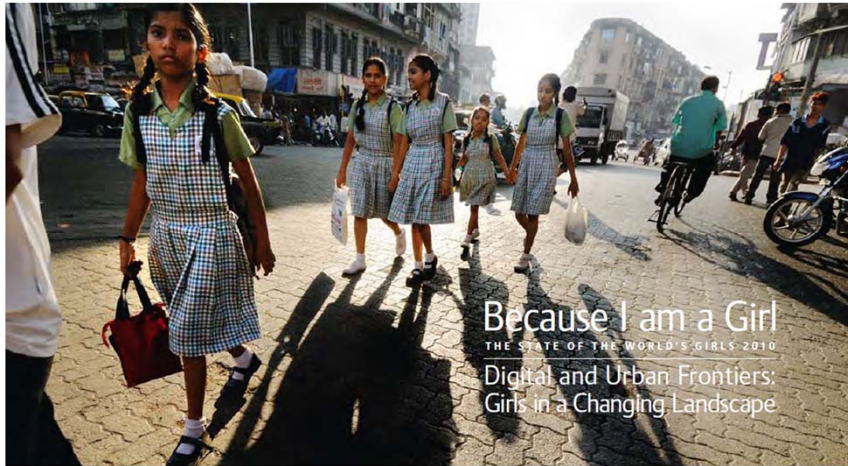


In Brazil, 53% of children live in homes where no adult uses the internet and 73% believe they know more than their parents (Barbosa et al, 2013)

In Africa and Latin America, internet cafés rather than homes or schools are key sites of use

In the GN, policy makers rely on parents – and on schools - to support and guide children's internet use. And research shows that parents are generally stepping up – though not all can or do. But that proportion of parents who lack the capacity to do so – for reasons of knowledge, time or other resources - may be much higher in the GS. Indeed, in many countries, even having parents is a privilege many children lack. Moreover, far more children than in the GN access the internet outside home and school – in internet cafes and other semi-public spaces. *So who can take on the safeguarding role in such cases? And who will promote the breadth and depth of benefits at stake?*

## Sources of difference



In China, Plan International reports:

- 44% of children said they had been approached online by strangers
- 79% of girls did not feel safe online, and only 1 in 3 knew how to report an online threat

In the GS we must think deeply about sources of difference. For instance, in the GN gender gaps are fairly small though still present. But in the GS, evidence suggests they are much more significant – in terms of access and also risk. *What other differences matter the most – language, religion, region, literacy or income? What should research take into account?*



## Conclusions



This talk is meant to open up questions not to answer them. Yet we already know, from the hard-won experiences of those who have worked cross-nationally, that what really matters is to sustain a thoughtful dialogue amongst us, one that may involve rethinking taken-for-granted assumptions on all sides, including anticipating the unanticipated consequences and learning from youth. And that means we are all here today to listen and learn. I look forward to what everyone has to say.