Leading Minds 2022 Conference

"Diversity must not be treated as a threat but instead ... as a source of strength."

–Amina Mohammed, Deputy-Secretary General, United Nations

"We need to step up efforts to fight the discrimination, exclusion and violence that millions of children face solely on their perceived identity – their ethnicity, their race, their religion, their gender identification, or sexual orientation and even their families' socio-economic status."

–Catherine Russell, Executive Director, UNICEF

The Changing Face of Child Identity

In a volatile world, it is more important than ever before for children and adolescents to know who they are and where they belong. For many people, that means simply knowing the basics: date of birth, name, gender and nationality – markers of identity that, in their eyes, are fixed.

That thinking does not reflect the complexity of children's identities today.

In the 21st century, children's identities are evolving, shaped by forces such as globalization, urbanization, demographic transition, climate change, digitalization, the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitics. As the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements have highlighted, identity is also at the heart of how many young people experience discrimination. Such experiences have led young people, in particular, to question entrenched beliefs, traditions, inequities and injustices related to identity.

Leading Minds 2022: The Vital Importance of Child Identity

These questions were at the heart of **Leading Minds 2022**. The conference was held from 2 to 4 November 2022 in Florence, Italy. It convened some world-leading thinkers — scholars, scientists, innovators, influencers, philanthropists, governments and young people — to discuss identity issues, in particular discrimination based on identity and the need to build positive child identities.

Co-hosted by UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Leading Minds conference series is built on five principles:

1. **Connect** to yourself and each other to build a leading minds culture that feels safe and secure;

2. **Listen** curiously, observe and learn;

3. **Share** expertise, experience and opinions;

4. **Discuss** ideas in small and large groups;

5. **Act** by developing action points.

The 2022 edition had the following objectives:

- Convene partners to promote greater acceptance and tolerance of diverse childhood identities and find ways to better protect children from violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect, discrimination and exclusion based on identity.

- Share a comprehensive review of child identity issues through a paper to be discussed during the conference.

- Provide a safe space for youth to express their experiences of discrimination based on their identity and provide youth participants with a leading role.

- Develop a better understanding of what a positive identity means in today's world.

- Explore the primary pathways to change how stakeholders view identity with the aim of informing global policy, strategic advocacy positions and programmes.

- Strengthen existing or develop new partnerships and alliances around child identity.

A leading role for youth leaders

Leading Minds 2022 brought participants together in a variety of formats to ensure they were able to connect, share, listen, learn and work together to develop a plan of action.

Youth leaders were at the heart of the conference, co-facilitating sessions along with experts and academics. They came from around the world and represented many different groups, including ethnic minorities, the Dalit in India, indigenous communities in the United States and New Zealand, the LGBQTI+ community and people living with disabilities. Many shared their own stories of building positive identities for themselves even in the face of discrimination based on their identity.

Among the session formats were panel discussions and guided discussions in smaller breakout groups facilitated by youth leaders and experts. The conference also made use of a 'fishbowl' format which involved an inner circle of chairs and an outer one, allowing the inner circle to discuss different themes around identity while the outer circle observed. Lunchtimes and coffee breaks allowed for bilateral discussions.

Connect

Participants got their first chance to meet in person at a welcome reception on the eve of the conference, which included welcome addresses from the Italian Government, UNICEF and youth leaders from the Leading Minds network as well as a musical performance by a local children's choir.

In a 'fireside chat,' Bo Viktor Nylund, Director of UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, spoke about his experience as UNICEF's country representative in Syria. He reflected on the devastating impact of 12 years of civil war on children's rights. Many girls are marrying earlier than before, some at the age of 14, as families are unable to cope with an extra mouth to feed. Although boys may still have a few hours of school each day, they also work at increasingly younger ages. Depriving children of education has a devastating impact, including on children's identity. "Unless you have good quality education, it's not possible to have a positive identity and reach your potential," said Bo Viktor.

Listen

The conference began with the Zulu greeting *Sawubona,* which means 'I see you' or 'I recognise your worth and dignity' – a phrase that underlines the philosophy behind Leading Minds, where all attendees are encouraged to feel comfortable participating regardless of their personal or professional background.

Opening remarks were made via video link by Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General, United Nations and Catherine Russell, Executive Director, UNICEF. Marco Giungi, Plenipotentiary Minister, Directorate General for Development Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Government of Italy, and Bo Viktor Nylund addressed the opening session in person.

Understanding identity challenges that youth and young people face

Some of the youth leaders then spoke about their experiences of identity and the challenges they have faced related to conflict, gender, education, sexuality, mental health and inclusion, among other areas. They reflected on how they have responded, how they support others, and what they think must be done to ensure all young people feel supported and can thrive.

Worldwide, about 129 million girls are out of school. One youth leader shared her story of losing her mother at the age of 8 to conflict and being fostered by relatives who did not let her attend school. "The only school uniform that I touched was the one I had to wash," she said. At 13, she was forced into marriage with a man in his 30s. Her situation only improved when she fled her country and met a person who offered protection and taught her to read and write. For her, education was the catalyst for building a positive identity and developing a sense of security.

Another youth leader shared his challenges of being gay and coming from a country – one of 67 in the world – where same-sex relations remain criminalized. He spoke of how hard it was to find someone to talk to while growing up, and of how safety concerns prevented the existence of a much-needed community and safe spaces.

His experiences found echoes in those of a youth leader who discussed the importance of having a community and access to mental health support as a young person figuring out her sexuality.

Youth leaders also reflected on the importance of preserving culture and language, especially to build positive identities among indigenous groups. One leader expressed his hopes for a future where indigenous children do not have to live between two worlds.

Worldwide, nearly 240 million children – or around one in ten – live with disabilities. They are almost four times more likely to experience violence and exclusion than children without disabilities. A youth leader who uses a wheelchair and who attended a mainstream school, spoke of how she was often identified as 'able enough' but also 'not disabled enough'. She envisions a future where everyone belonging to a minority group could – with the support of family, community and the education system – more easily find their true self.

Share and Discuss

Why child identity matters for government policy, international efforts and humanitarian programming

Even though the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the world's most widely ratified human rights treaty, many countries are far from implementing it in full, including its articles referring to identity. The CRC states not only the fundamental right to a name and a nationality but also addresses some broader identity issues, including non-discrimination and the right of the child to preserve his or her identity.

Some of the greatest identity challenges are faced by children and youth who flee war or leave in search of a better life due to poverty or natural and climate-induced disasters. Many are unaccompanied. Many also have no identity documents, meaning they cannot prove their age, which may lead to deportation or being held in adult detention centres. Even those who are given refugee status often struggle in host countries, where they may be subject to discrimination or have other identity challenges, such as disabilities or a sexual orientation that is criminalised in the host country.

There is also abundant evidence from around the world showing that child poverty and disadvantage are strongly linked to identity-based exclusion and discrimination. The poorest and most marginalized children in every country and continent are those excluded on grounds of identity – disability, ethnicity, gender, legal status, sexual orientation, religion and other factors. In addition to its impact on child outcomes, identity-based discrimination also takes a toll on children's mental health. Exposure to racial discrimination is a chronic source of trauma in the lives of many children in societies across the world, harming mental and physical outcomes as well as parent and community support and functioning.

Key themes of the interim Leading Minds conference paper on child identity

A comprehensive evidence-based conference paper sparked lively discussion. It highlighted how identity is a fundamental part of what makes each child and young person unique and how identity impacts mental, social, cognitive and emotional wellbeing.

It also discussed how identity changes over the course of a child's life. As children grow up, they continuously acquire additional forms of identity. These include evolving physical characteristics, cognitive progression and self-chosen identities, among others. The paper also pointed out how experiences of childhood and adolescence are influenced not only by the identities that children are given, but also by those that are acquired, denied or forced upon them.

Different forms of identities: Identity is multi-faceted and complex, comprising numerous, fluid, intersecting, overlapping and dynamic elements. The Leading Minds conference focused its conceptual framing of identity on three core aspects:

- **Legal identity** is an individual's standing in law, which can come to the fore in issues of migration or refugee status and statelessness. Even though the CRC establishes the right of the child to a legal identity, globally almost <u>one in four children</u> (23 per cent) do not officially exist because their births were never registered.

- **Social identity** relates to a child's affiliation – chosen or not – to a certain social group based on a common characteristic, for example, ethnicity, gender, religion or disability, among others. Social identity also relates to the stories people tell about themselves and to how others perceive them through those narratives.

- **Personal identity** relates to the parts of a child's identity that are unique to her or him. The formation of a personal identity can be a lifelong process influenced both by legal and social identities and by factors such as personality, physical and mental well-being, and self-chosen identities. Personal identity is key to understanding the development of positive identity.

Too little research on identity comes from the global south: The conference paper highlighted how most of the research on identity comes from high-income countries. This absence makes it challenging to develop a full understanding of what identity means in different cultural settings, which can have significant real-world consequences. For example, toolkits for parents or caregivers and teachers on fostering positive identities should reflect cultural and language nuances, but the knowledge needed to do this is not always available.

Cyberspace poses both opportunities and risks: Young people are ever more connected online, a trend that gained momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many are now far more comfortable than most adults in moving seamlessly between the offline and online worlds. Understanding the digital world, and the impact of online activities, is essential to understanding these children's identities.

Online identities can offer opportunities for children and young people to explore different identities. This can be important for young LGBTQ+ people, for whom the online world may offer a space to explore questions of sexuality and gender. The online world can also allow young people to find one another, to craft and amplify their own narratives, and to organize and campaign for causes they believe in. This can help build a sense of belonging and can allow young people to build larger social identities.

Yet, while the digital world has opened new opportunities for children and young people to connect, it has also raised serious concerns. These include, for example, the question of how children's identity is influenced by the commercial interests of social media firms, which seek to maximize the time users spend online and the extent to which they engage with other users. Spending more time on social media may be linked to lower levels of self-esteem, while there are concerns also about how exposure to unrealistic body images online may lead adolescents, especially teenage girls, to become dissatisfied with their bodies and to pursue unhealthy behaviours. Cyberbullying is another serious concern, with its potential to fuel depression, anxiety, isolation, suicidal behaviour, loneliness, anger and low self-esteem.

Building positive identities: Identity evolves primarily through our relationships, connections and learning experiences. Primary carers, parents and those with a close relationship play an important role. These processes can be especially complex for adopted children. New adoption rights in some countries are also influencing identities by allowing children to learn the identities of their biological parents.

Children and young people are taking on positive identities as human rights activists and young leaders, for example in climate change and the Black Lives Matter movements. Young people who have left their country of origin are embracing aspects of their old identities as well as new ones, including their native languages. In addition, those from indigenous communities and other marginalised groups, for example, the Dalit in India, are recognising the importance of knowing their own stories as a way to move forward.

Today, albeit in only a few countries, children with gender dysphoria can have the opportunity to change their gender, and more young people who have a different sexual orientation than the mainstream are expressing themselves. Male identity is also an issue, in particular how more can be done for boys to help them develop a positive sense of masculinity.

The key role of education: To foster positive identities, education must be of high quality and inclusive, respecting children regardless of their gender, background and physical and mental ability. Schools should make provisions for mental health services, offering trained counsellors and social workers as well as safe spaces for refugee children.

Yet, education systems can undermine positive identities. Girls are denied opportunities in many countries while in some countries, such as Jamaica, boys may be marginalised in education. Also, the curriculum in many countries in the global south is still linked to the colonial past or only represents the mainstream groups. Many children are just taught a 'single' story. A youth leader from the Dakota indigenous group in the United States told Leading Minds about how his culture and language are overlooked in the education system. This has contributed to the poor mental health of indigenous communities, who experience high rates of suicide and depression.

There are huge challenges, especially in low-income countries. Many already lack qualified teachers and infrastructure, including water and hygiene facilities, which contributes to high school dropout rates, particularly among girls. Even among high-income countries, many are unable to meet the educational needs of children particularly those from marginalised groups.

Mainstreaming the identity debate: In recent y ears, polarization has increased over many identity issues, particularly around gender and sexual orientation. This has made debate around some child identity issues appear threatening to some parents, communities, policymakers and businesses. Important questions need to be answered on how to engage societies broadly and meaningfully in these issues in the years to come.

Act

The conference not only provided a space for ideas but also a commitment to action, an important focus of many of the breakout groups.

Moving forward on identity

Invest in research and evidence: Although academics have been studying identity for many years, a wide gap persists between academia and policy. This is partly because the concept of identity is so broad, much of the research emanates from the global north and too few organizations as well as young people have been involved in research, particularly on emerging issues. Leading Minds participants agreed that one of the first steps should be to conduct a systematic literature and data review on identity issues across disciplines to identify research gaps. There was support also for investment in participatory research co-designed with children and young people.

Strengthen polices and programmes: Services tend to be designed and targeted based on single identities rather than looking at the potential diversity of a child's identity. Revisiting the CRC and other conventions can help with the development of a universal understanding of child identity. Safe spaces can also be created for people to come together to help break down identity into operational components, which can be used for UNICEF and other stakeholders in their programming. Such agencies need to see where identity fits in with their priorities, such as programmes that build resilience to climate change, address sexual and reproductive health, foster mental health or support refugees and migrants. For example, when protecting refugee and migrant children, what support is being given to ensure certain groups do not face discrimination and that children with disabilities are provided for? This also means identifying ways to encourage a range of stakeholders to engage with child identity in ways that are non-threatening to them. However, in some countries it also means addressing legal issues, in particular the criminalisation of certain forms of identity and the need to enhance legal protections.

Education is a key entry point. Schools should be places where inclusion and integration take place and where children with different interests and identities can thrive. Stakeholders need to pressure governments to uphold commitments in Article 29 of the CRC to include respect for ethnic, religious and indigenous identities in children's education. Achieving this may include adapting the curriculum in many countries and training teachers. The language, history and culture of ethnic minority groups need to be preserved to prevent against forced assimilation.

While programmes are increasingly making better use of new technologies, there is room to improve this around the most basic identity issues, such as digital identities and birth registration. The private sector has a role to play, too, particularly in technology, marketing and standards.

Participants stated that developing evidence-based policies and programmes that tackle discrimination and foster positive identities in children and young people is vital, especially for the most vulnerable. Decision makers need to be encouraged to use impact assessments and child rights-based budgeting to strengthen policies and programmes.

Create space for children and young people's participation: Education systems, communities and families need to provide children and young people with the space to promote and develop positive identities, yet this does not always happen. As a first step, the Leading Minds network of youth leaders committed to meeting with UNICEF Innocenti to re-assess the outcomes of Leading Minds 2022. The network also proposed to conduct landscape analysis to understand whom to reach and influence and to hold themed webinars focusing on excluded children and young people. They proposed designing guidelines on how to better include building positive identities into the work of organizations like UNICEF. The youth leaders also plan to co-author a paper with UNICEF Innocenti that builds on discussions during the conference. They will explore an idea of creating a children's charter for the rights of the child in online spaces and an independent regulatory body for children's use of social media. They expressed an interest in attending the CRC committee meetings and other treaty bodies to enhance the debate on child identity issues.

Promote diverse partnerships to connect, share and act together: It was widely agreed that UNICEF should extend its partnerships both within the UN community such as UNESCO and UNHCR as well as with civil society groups to take the identity conversation further.

Boost investments and financing: While resources are limited, it was proposed that priority should be given to grassroot movements and key organizations that are able to transform social norms positively and reach diverse population groups, especially the most disadvantaged and excluded.

Participants

PARTICIPANT	TITLE AND AFFILIATION
Bruce Adamson	Commissioner for Children and Young People Scotland
Hans Ahlström	Representative of Eva Ahlström Foundation, Ahlström Collective Impact Ambassador, Finland
Maria Alexandrova	Youth Advocate for Inclusive Education, Bulgaria
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Karen Carter	Senior Adviser Research, UNICEF Innocenti, Florence, Italy
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Mia Dambach	Executive Director, Child Identity Protection, Netherlands
Mimma Dardano	Presidente della Commissione Politiche Sociali e della Salute, Sanità e Servizi Sociali, Mayor's Office, Florence, Italy
Beth Doherty	Youth Delegate UNICEF, Ireland
Pablo Espiniella	Chief of Staff, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children
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Maria Grazia Giuffrida	President of the Istituto degli Innocenti, Florence, Italy
Marco Giungi	Head of the Unit for Strategies and Multilateral Global Processes, Minister for Development Cooperation, Government of Italy
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Despina Karamperidou	Education Specialist, Research, UNICEF Innocenti Florence, Italy
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Alliyah Logan	Youth Delegate, Founder of Cultivate Global Education, USA
Filippo Lonardo	Councillor, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Italy
Victor Lopez Carmen	Indigenous Youth Delegate, Harvard Medical School, USA
Faridah Luanda	Gender & Diversity Coordinator, Global Refugee Youth Network, DRC/Sweden
Angus Macbeth	Senior Lecturer in Clinical Psychology, University Edinburgh, Scotland
Tea Machaidze	Child Protection Officer, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children
Natasha Maimba	Youth Participant, Ireland
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Sarah Martelli	Country Coordinator a.i, UNICEF O/P Rome
Shanaaz Matthews	Director, Children's Institute and Professor of Public Health in the Faculty of Health Sciences University of Cape Town, South Africa
Laura Meyer	Vice Chair of the Eva Ahlström Foundation, Finland
Amina Mohammed	Deputy Secretary General, United Nations (video intervention)
Daniel Mohaput	Partnerships Manager (Geneva), UNICEF
Eric Njuguna	Youth consultant, UNICEF Kenya
Joan Nyanyuki	Executive Director, Africa Child Policy Forum,
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Ree-Anna Robinson	Youth Delegate, UNICEF Jamaica
Paolo Rozera	Director General, UNICEF Italian National Committee, National Committee, Rome, Italy
Monica Rubini	Professor, University of Bologna, Italy
Lauren Rumble	Associate Director (New York), Gender Equality UNICEF
Catherine Russell	Executive Director, UNICEF (video intervention)
Lorraine Sherr	Professor, University College London, UK
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UNICEF Innocenti
Conference planning, advisory, writing, convening and communications

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Cristina Ramos Solis	Consultant

Agenda

Note: For speakers' affiliations, see preceding list of Participants

Wednesday evening, 2 November

Aperitivo and pre-meeting activities run by Red Zebra conference facilitators
Performance by 'Piccolo Coro Melograno' directed by Maestra Laura Bartoli.

Welcome Notes

- Bo Viktor Nylund
- Maria Grazia Giuffrida
- Sara Funaro
- Eugenio Giani
- Marco Giungi

Opening talk: How Understanding Identity Can Protect Children

Fireside chat with Bo Viktor Nylund: How current crises affecting children highlight the role of enhanced research on child identity to improving programming and outcomes for children

Thursday 3 November

MORNING

Pre-meeting activities run by Red Zebra
Welcome & brief explanation of Leading Minds philosophy

Video messages

Amina Mohammed
Catherine Russell

Opening remarks from co-hosts of Leading Minds 2022

- Bo Viktor Nylund
- Marco Giungi

Youth leader voices

Youth leaders describe identity challenges they have faced, how they have coped and supported others and what must be done for young people to feel supported.

Panel: What is child identity, and why does it matter for government policy, international efforts and humanitarian programming?

PANELISTS

- Matlhodi Angelina Makwetla (video message)
- Bruce Adamson
- Mia Dambach
- Pablo Espiniella

MODERATOR

- Lorraine Sherr

Presentation: Key findings of interim Leading Minds conference paper on child identity

PRESENTERS

- Eugenie Mireille Kodogo
- Angus Macbeth

MODERATOR AND DISCUSSANT

- Dominic Richardson
- Shanaaz Matthews

AFTERNOON

BREAKOUT SESSIONS 1: FIGHTING DISCRIMINATION

Identity and belonging and the imperative of community to positive child identity

MODERATORS

- Verena Knaus
- Natasha Maimba

Protection of rights of children with alternative gender and sexual identities

MODERATORS

- Lauren Rumble
- Eric Njuguna

Ethnic and religious discrimination and child identity

MODERATORS

- Suraj Yengde
- Victor Lopez-Carmen

BREAKOUT SESSIONS 2: BUILDING POSITIVE IDENTITY

The role of identity in youth activism

MODERATORS

- Shai Naides
- Alejandro Rene Daly Rivero

Define and be defined: On self-defining your identity

MODERATORS

- Dainius Puras
- Ree-Anna Robinson

Social media, the online world and digital identity How the online world is shaping child identity

MODERATORS

- Marium Hussein
- Beth Doherty

Wrap-up plenary

Friday 4 November

MORNING

Pre-meeting activities run by Red Zebra

Fishbowl panel blending two conversations

The changing world and child identity

How the changing world is shaping child identity through shifts in economics, society and the environment, and how child rights can and must respond.

Moving forward: Translating evidence and experience into action

Translating evidence and experience into action

Peer action groups

Researchers and academics

> LEAD
> - Joan Nyanyuki

Policy and practitioners

> LEAD
> - Katherine Holland

Youth leaders

> LEAD
> - Josiah Tualamali'I

AFTERNOON

Discussion

Peer action groups report back

Final discussion: Working together on child identity

Plenary session led by youth leaders on taking forward the youth identity agenda.

Final recap, next steps and closing remarks

- Bo Viktor Nylund