

A dark purple world map is centered in the background, overlaid with a network of white lines and dots representing global connectivity. The text is white and centered over the map.

# SHIELD Global Online Safety Conference March 2026

BRIEFING  
AND  
POSITIONING STATEMENT

The logo consists of a stylized shield icon made of four white geometric shapes (two triangles and two squares) arranged in a larger square pattern.

**Shield.**

# Two Theories of Change

In March 2026, SHIELD convened eighty speakers and contributors from twenty-five countries and five continents to answer two questions:

**Why does online harm persist? What does it actually take to address it?**

Understanding what the conference produced requires understanding where different players in online safety operate, what each can see, and where its frame ends. Online safety work is currently organized around two distinct approaches.

## The First: Institutional Leverage

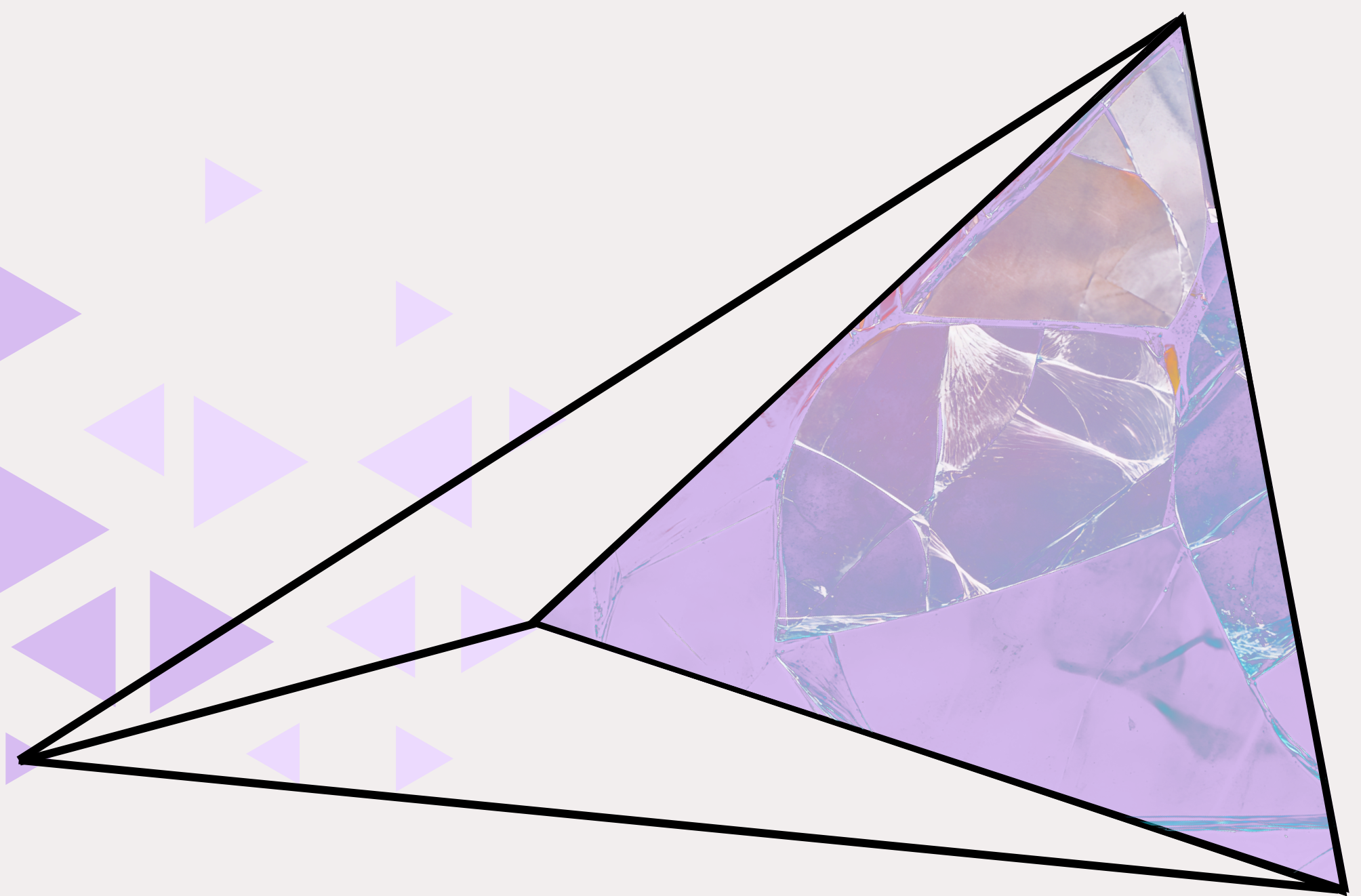
Operates like a wide-angle lens, built to see the big picture



Works through legislation, platform accountability, and evidence produced in forms that decision-makers can act upon. It has produced real results and built essential field infrastructure. But it requires online harm to be visible and measurable to institutions before those institutions can act.

## The Second: Grassroots Practice

Sees and acts upon what is only visible at community and individual level



Built by practitioners working from the specific conditions of specific people in specific places. It produces solutions that function where online harm actually occurs. It operates almost entirely without the resources, recognition, or infrastructure that the first demands.

The first, institutional leverage, has shaped the field's infrastructure, its standards, its funding flows, and its definition of what counts as evidence. The second, grassroots, activity produces solutions that function where the first cannot reach.

**The gap between them is where this document begins.**

The conference itself was designed to center the practitioners working within the second of these approaches: people building safety solutions at ground level, in specific communities, in specific languages, whose knowledge rarely reaches the spaces where decisions about online safety are made.

# Four Learnings

Four learnings emerged consistently across what speakers from different regions, harm types, and disciplines shared. They do not describe four separate problems with four separate solutions. They describe one structural condition from four different directions. Addressing one of them without the others leaves the harm in place.

## **Evidence of safety is not the same as safety.**

Systems oriented toward demonstrating compliance serve the organisation that needs to demonstrate it, not the person who needs to be protected.

## **Co-design is quality control.**

The knowledge required to design correctly is held by the people least likely to be in the room. Their absence is not only an ethical failure. It is a technical one.

## **Harm originates below the response layer.**

Responses concentrate where harm is visible. The conditions producing it originate one level lower, in design decisions, community contexts, and a pace of change that leaves no reasonable opportunity to adapt.

## **Protection is not the same as preparation.**

Removing a threat does not build the capacity to navigate the next one. Digital harm is structural and persistent. Resilience is not optional.

**Systems built to protect people are consistently optimising for their own accountability.**

Governance arrives after the fact, accountability is distributed across layers that do not communicate, and the pace of technological change leaves communities, educators, parents, and policymakers with no reasonable opportunity to understand what is happening before the next change arrives.

**This is not a coordination failure that better process design will resolve. It is a condition that requires accountability to begin before harm occurs, not after it has already reached the people the system was never designed to keep safe.**

# Four Paths Forward

Addressing these conditions requires working on four fronts simultaneously.

## 1 Co-Design as Prerequisite

Systems must involve the people they will most impact from the beginning. Co-design is not a participation exercise. It is the mechanism by which designers gain access to the information required to build correctly.

## 2 Measurement on Its Own Terms

Ground-level work must be evaluated against metrics that reflect what it actually does. Making Theory of Change 2 work legible and fundable on its own terms is one of the most concrete steps available.

## 3 The Economics of Ground-Level Safety

Resources must flow to practitioners working at ground level as an equal investment, not a supplement. That requires an honest, bottom-up account of what this work costs and what it produces.

## 4 Governance and the Accountability Gap

The structural conditions documented here will not change without grassroots voices reaching the processes where governance decisions are being made.



SHIELD was founded to bridge a gap that its leadership has operated inside for years: the distance between the places and processes where online safety decisions are made and the ground-level practitioners who hold the knowledge those processes need. That position is rare. It means SHIELD can move between both worlds in ways that benefit both: ensuring that what is being built at ground level informs the standards, funding decisions, and governance processes that shape the field, while ensuring that those processes become more responsive to the communities they were designed to serve.

The four interventions above are where SHIELD proposes to put that position to work.

**Link for full conference document:** <https://shieldthefuture.com/>

**Contact:** Angeline Corvaglia, Executive Director, [angeline@shieldthefuture.com](mailto:angeline@shieldthefuture.com)

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