

A Generation at Stake: The Urgent Need for a Holistic Approach to Supporting Children and Youth through US Foreign Policy

Introduction

Compounding global crises, such as COVID-19, climate change, and prolonged conflicts have upended young people's lives around the world. The last two years alone have resulted in the undoing of decades of progress to improve children's and youth's wellbeing and to amplify their voices. Amidst these global challenges, the U.S. government must prioritize children's and youth's most critical needs: health, safety and education. Unfortunately, U.S. foreign assistance programs operate and are funded in sector silos and are often lacking the coordination and collaboration needed to maximize child and youth development.

A 2020 report found that foreign assistance for children and youth is spread between 26 and 30 federal offices, depending on the fiscal year, and **less than .08% of federal funds goes to children internationally.**ⁱ Critically, their calculations overestimate numbers for accounts where children and youth were not the sole beneficiaries. This lack of transparency is compounded by urgent crises that disproportionately impact young people. In fact, approximately 85% of the world's children live in under-resourced countries that will face the most serious impacts of climate change,ⁱⁱ and bear the brunt of an estimated 80% of climate change-related illnesses and injuries.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition, foreign assistance programs often do not reach the most vulnerable or marginalized, including girls, LGBTQI+ children and youth, those with disabilities, and racial and ethnic minorities.

Current U.S. Foreign Assistance Approaches

In some areas such as education, maternal and child health and protection and care for children in adversity, U.S. investments have yielded strong returns for young people—as well as American taxpayers. In fact, since the year 2000 alone, U.S. foreign assistance has contributed to:

- Cutting global maternal, infant and child mortality rates in half.
- Cutting the number of children in child labor by one-third.
- Enabling 2.4 million babies to be born HIV-free.

The U.S. government has been instrumental in promoting positive outcomes and improving young people's lives through programs such as PEP-FAR, the Assistance for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children in Developing Countries Act, the Global Child Thrive Act, and the USAID Policy on Youth in Development, among others. These significant improvements are supported by strong policies, strategies, and initiatives that the U.S. government undertook to address the multifaceted issues facing them.^{iv}

However, Congressional earmarks intended to support vulnerable young people often end up constraining innovation and holistic cross-governmental efforts. Despite numerous attempts, the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 has not been sufficiently updated to reflect current realities, making it difficult for different agencies or accounts with overlapping mandates to coordinate with one another.^v Additionally, tracking funding outside of these earmarks and child-focused accounts is not possible.

Fast Facts: Children and Youth Today

1. Only .08% of the federal budget is directed at children internationally.^{vi}
2. There are 1.2 billion young people aged 15-24 years—about 16% of the population.^{vii}
3. Nearly 3.5 million children have been displaced by conflict and natural disasters.^{viii}
4. 45 million children suffer from severe malnutrition. Nearly half of all under-5 deaths are caused by hunger.^{ix}
5. Roughly 7 million children globally have lost a parent or other caregiver to COVID-19.^x

A Common-Sense Solution

A common sense and whole-of-government agenda—one that engages a wide range of U.S. government and NGO actors alongside a broad spectrum of support systems, including family, schools, and communities—would ensure that children and youth are supported throughout their early years and beyond. Such an approach should be a priority for the administration and Congress. ChildFund and our partners consulted with young people, U.S. government officials, and children's rights experts in the foreign policy and programming community to develop these recommendations.^{xi}

Recommendations

1) Meaningful Youth Engagement: Youth voices should be integrated into policy and programming conception and implementation, and these consultations should be comprised of meaningful two-way communications between the U.S. government and young people, since those most affected must be centered in identifying solutions.

- **Training:** Create child- and youth-focused curricula and ensure that all staff are trained on child safeguarding and youth engagement best practices.
- **Youth consultations:** Meaningfully engage with diverse youth- and girl-led organizations including LGBTQI+ youth, youth with disabilities, girls and young women. Mission staff are well-placed to ensure country-level strategy consultations take place.
- **Platforms:** Support youth activism, leadership, and government engagement, including regarding COVID-19 recovery and response processes.

2) Congressional Leadership: Congress should prioritize robust funding for and oversight of existing policies/programs focused on children and youth. Specifically, Congress should:

Oversight: Require the Secretary of State and the USAID Administrator to submit a public report that is disaggregated by country describing funding amounts and uses for programs that promote child/youth protection, education, health, support, and safety.

- **Data:** Mandate that data consistently be disaggregated by sex, age, and disability to assess the lifelong impact of development assistance on children/youth.
- **Metrics:** Require that consistent, comparable metrics, (e.g. gender, disability, refugee/migrant status, life stages) are collected to inform programs that achieve better outcomes for young people.
- **Funding priorities:** Appropriate funding to train field staff on meaningful youth engagement to ensure that staff have evidence-based tools and resources at their disposal and can include children and youth across programs. Increase funding for youth-led organizations and reduce the bureaucratic barriers that currently limit their ability to receive U.S. funding.

3) White House Leadership: The White House should ensure that children and youth are a priority in U.S. foreign policy and assistance. As a leading provider of foreign assistance, the U.S. government could inspire and provoke a robust global response through leadership. The White House should consider the following actions:

- **Elevate named positions:** Increase the authority and budget control for those roles focused on children and youth and ensure regular briefings are held with the executive office to oversee multi-sectoral efforts and inter- and intra-agency collaboration. Existing and named USAID and Department of State positions currently lack this authority.
- **Provide greater budget authority:** The USAID Youth Coordinator should have authority to control no less than \$5 million for training and technical support. Senior-level point people should be named at the Departments of State and Labor, Peace Corps, and other relevant agencies to coordinate and report on children and youth activities publicly.

4) Enhanced Whole-of-Government Coordination: All relevant agencies should facilitate whole-of-government coordination to ensure transparency and accountability with agency representatives able to control funding and decision-making authority. Every sectoral strategy (e.g. climate, disability, gender, food security, etc.) should include a child and youth focus informed by meaningful consultation with those affected, to directly address young people's needs and systematize their engagement throughout policy and program cycles.

- **Evidence-based approaches:** Intra- and cross-governmental coordination should use participatory, evidence-based methodologies, including duplicating best practices utilized in efforts such as PEPFAR to protect and empower vulnerable children and families.
- **Consistent Indicators:** Indicators for children and youth should be embedded across all government agency programs and throughout the program cycle (e.g. RFP requirements, F indicator) to determine if/how programming impacts children and youth, even if that is not the primary objective

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i First Focus. (2021). Children's Budget 2021. Report. Accessed online at: <https://firstfocus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/FirstFocus-ChildrensBudget2021.pdf>

ii UNICEF. (2014). Children on the Front Line. Accessed online at: https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/ccc_final_2014.pdf

iii McMichael, A., et al. Chapter 20: Climate Change. (2004). Global climate change. In M. Ezzati, A. Lopez, A. Rodgers, & C. Murray (Eds.), Comparative quantification of health risks: Global and regional burden of disease due to selected major risk factors (pp. 1543-1649). Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization. Accessed online at: <https://www.who.int/publications/cra/chapters/volume2/1543-1650.pdf>

iv Kaiser Family Foundation. The U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). (May 27, 2020). Accessed online at: <https://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/fact-sheet/the-u-s-presidents-emergency-plan-for-aids-relief-pepfar/>; U.S. Department of State. DREAMS Partnership. Website. Accessed online at: <https://www.state.gov/pepfar-dreams-partnership/>; USAID. Youth in Development: Realizing the Demographic Opportunity. (2012). Report. Accessed online at: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/Youth_in_Development_Policy_0.pdf

v CSIS. (April 15, 2015). Global Development Forum: Breaking Down the 150 Account Preview. Blog. Washington, DC. Accessed online at: <https://csisprosper.com/2015/04/20/global-development-forum-150-account/>

vi First Focus. (2021). Children's Budget 2021. Report. Accessed online at: <https://firstfocus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/FirstFocus-ChildrensBudget2021.pdf>

vii United Nations. (2019). Global Issues: Youth. Accessed online at: <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>

viii UNICEF (2018, September 18). [Press Release] 1 in 3 children and young people is out of school in countries affected by war or natural disasters. Accessed online at: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/1-3-children-and-young-people-out-school-countries-affected-war-or-natural-disasters>

ix World Food Program USA. (2019, September 1). Accessed online at: <https://www.wfpusa.org/articles/what-you-need-to-know-about-child-malnutrition/>

x Imperial College London. (2022). COVID-19 Orphanhood Calculator. Accessed online at: https://imperialcollegelondon.github.io/orphanhood_calculator/#/country/Global

xi To date, ChildFund and our partners have consulted with five high-level current or former members of the U.S. government, 10 young people, and nine leaders of civil society coalitions focused on education, gender, violence prevention and response, and maternal and child health and nutrition.