

The Urgent Need for a Whole-of-Government Approach to Address the Needs of Children and Youth in U.S. Foreign Policy

A whole-of-government approach to U.S. foreign policy engages a wide range of actors and a broad spectrum of support systems, including family, schools and communities, to ensure all children and youth are supported throughout the life course, from birth to early adulthood (typically encompassing ages 0-24). This approach ensures that all young people are able to reach their full potential and are included in decision-making processes that impact their lives. It equally values all aspects of a child's well-being—social, emotional, physical, intellectual, cultural and creative. It leverages the full force of the U.S. government's diplomacy, development and humanitarian aid, and relies upon strong holistic metrics for success and inter-agency coordination.

Such an approach is more urgent now than ever before as the compounding threats of COVID-19, climate change and protracted crises disproportionately affect young people who—like everyone else—do not live their lives in silos. They are not hungry one day, and in need of education another. 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. Too often, these programs do not reach the most vulnerable or marginalized, including girls, LGBTQI+ children and youth, children and youth with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities and children and youth living in crisis or displacement. In fact, according to a 2018 report,ⁱ

“In recent years, there has been no centralized mechanism to monitor, track and report on U.S. government international assistance to children and youth across all agencies and sectors. It is therefore difficult...to fully understand what the U.S. government is doing – or not doing – in this realm.”

This lack of transparency is compounded by urgent crises that disproportionately impact children and youth, including a rapidly changing climate and the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, approximately 85% of the world's children live in developing countries that will face the most serious impacts of climate change,ⁱⁱ and they will bear the brunt of an estimated 80% of climate change-related illnesses and injuries.ⁱⁱⁱ Young people have been at the forefront of recent movements to address climate change and should be considered crucial stakeholders in discussing and implementing solutions to key issues.

Current U.S. Foreign Assistance Approaches

Congressional earmarks intended to support vulnerable young people often end up constraining innovation and holistic cross-governmental efforts. Despite numerous attempts to update the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, the law remains in place and is frequently noted to be misaligned with current realities. One major critique is that funding allocations make it difficult for different agencies or different accounts with overlapping mandates to coordinate with one another.^{iv} However, tracking funding outside of these earmarks and child-focused accounts is not possible. Areas such as education, maternal and child health and protection and care for children in adversity are often easier to trace from appropriated funding to specific outcomes than other issue areas, as is the case with U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). PEPFAR's authorizing legislation mandated that no less than 10% of funding should go towards orphans and vulnerable children.^v Regarding children and foreign assistance, the best data available, from a 2020 First Focus on Children report, notes that foreign assistance for children and youth is spread between 26 and 30 federal offices, depending on the fiscal year, and less than .11% of federal funds go to this group.^{vi} Given inconsistencies in reporting and delivery of funds found through their research, the report authors were unable to determine specific numbers for agencies like the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and their calculations overestimate numbers for accounts where children and youth were not the sole beneficiaries.^{vii} To this point, while increased funding is needed, an enhanced level of monitoring is also needed to ensure transparency and efficiency.

Foundational Strategies and Initiatives for Children and Youth

The U.S. government has been instrumental in promoting positive outcomes and improving children and youth's lives and well-being. These significant improvements are supported by strong policies, strategies and initiatives that the U.S. government undertook to address the multifaceted issues facing them.^{viii,ix,x} A whole-of-government approach would build on this strong foundation and link all life stages and ages across both the life course and U.S. foreign assistance to ensure holistic attention

is paid to young people. For children to access their potential as they grow, they need stability in all stages of their lives from infancy, childhood, adolescence to youth.

In fact, since 2000, U.S. foreign assistance has contributed to:

- ✓ Cutting maternal, infant and child mortality rates in half globally with support from USAID;
- ✓ Cutting the number of children in child labor by one-third and reducing the number of children engaged in hazardous work with support from the Department of Labor; and
- ✓ Enabling 2.4 million babies to be born HIV-free due to PEPFAR-related efforts.

2003	PEPFAR , the largest commitment by any nation to a single disease, created and spurs greater international attention and donor commitments equalling \$90 billion in funding to date.
2005	Assistance for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children in Developing Countries Act (PL 109-95), enacted. USAID appoints a Special Advisor to oversee a whole-of-government approach to reaching vulnerable children in developing countries.
2012	U.S. Government Action Plan on Children in Adversity , and later the 2019 Advancing Protection and Care for Children in Adversity Strategy, outlines a whole-of-government framework for children internationally.
2012	USAID Policy on Youth in Development released. The policy is the first of its kind for USAID and harmonized decades of work for young people. Among other things, it revised the "F" framework with it's own cross-cutting category, defining youth as ages 10-29, focusing on ages 15-24.
2014	PEPFAR commitment expanded through DREAMS , a public-private partnership focused on multisectoral interventions to reduce HIV and other risks to the health and well-being of adolescent girls.
2017	Reinforcing Education Accountability in Development (READ) Act passed, creating a new position, Special Coordinator for Education at USAID and requiring the first U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education.
2021	Global Child Thrive Act passed, focusing on early childhood development (ECD) and building on the strategy for Advancing Protection and Care for Children in Adversity. An interagency taskforce is created to coordinate ECD policies and partnerships across the government. The act defines early childhood as ages 0-8.

Overview of the First Six Months of the Biden-Harris Administration

ChildFund analyzed the first six months (January 20-July 20, 2021) of the Biden-Harris administration, including all executive orders, press releases and publicly available speeches and Twitter texts from President Biden, Vice President Harris and the White House. These 1,033 documents examined all public mentions of infants, children, adolescents or youth in order to better understand the administration's priorities for these populations. To do this we analyzed the frequency with which the administration mentioned children or youth, the context in which they were discussed, and whether each mention was substantive or not. ChildFund defined substantive mentions as those related to a policy directive, funding, political will, or which included a direct quote or reference to or by a child or young person.

We found that 3.8% of all mentions of children or youth were in the context of foreign policy or foreign assistance, and that **just 2% of the president's speeches substantively discussed children and youth in foreign policy**. Most mentions of children or youth were domestic. Of the 108 tweets that substantively mention children and/or youth, just four tweets from the accounts of the president, vice president and White House—combined—do so in an international context. President Biden signed 52 executive orders in his first six months, seven of which mention children or youth, but only one of these is in the context of foreign policy. Most discussions of children or youth were broad and failed to look at the unique needs of different life stages or age ranges. In fact, there were only three substantive mentions by the president and vice president on the topic of adolescent girls.

Recommendations

A whole-of-government agenda for children and youth can and should be a priority for the Biden-Harris Administration and the 117th Congress. ChildFund and our partners consulted with current and former U.S. government officials, children and youth and children's rights experts in the foreign policy advocacy and program implementing community to inform the development of these recommendations.^{xi}

1) COVID-19: No less than 25% of all new COVID-19 response funding for international assistance should reach children and youth ages 0-24. Children and youth worldwide are facing increased violence, food insecurity, learning loss, and sexual abuse and exploitation, as well as enormous losses of primary caregivers. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities they face and reversed decades of progress. An estimated 356 million children, 1 in 6 children globally, lived in extreme poverty before the pandemic,^{xii} and experts predict this has only worsened. An astonishing 1.5 million children lost a mother, father or caregiver in the first 10 months of COVID-19, a number that potentially doubled in the first five months of 2021.^{xiii} It is estimated that, with the current trajectories, the pandemic’s impacts will set progress on children’s issues back by 20 years.^{xiv} According to UNICEF, 1.8 billion children live in 104 countries where violence prevention and response services have now been disrupted due to COVID-19; and 6,000 children under 5 could die a day—more than four per minute—directly due to COVID-19.^{xv}

2) White House Leadership: Support from the highest levels of government is crucial to implementing truly holistic policies and programs and signal that children are a priority. We recommend a direct mandate in the form of:

- **An executive order:** An executive order should be issued that instructs all agencies implementing U.S. foreign assistance to coordinate in order to create a government-wide response that integrates and meaningfully addresses issues affecting children and youth. The resulting whole-of-government strategy should incentivize, institutionalize and elevate an intentional child- and youth-centered lens and approach across all relevant agencies.
- **Senior Leadership:** The president should appoint a senior official to report to the president, vice president or a cabinet member to oversee the development and implementation of the above strategy with the authority to allocate sufficient resources across a variety of agencies. Currently, named positions at USAID and the Department of State which focus on children and youth lack such authority. The USAID Youth Coordinator should be elevated with 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.
- **White House Children and Youth Commission and Summit:** The White House should convene a White House Council on Children and Youth that includes regular discussions with young people affected by U.S. foreign assistance and provides consistent and transparent public reports on progress against any policies and strategies for children and youth. The Council should amplify policy commitments for children and youth by fostering a platform for whole-of-government planning and policy implementation and programs aimed at optimizing the healthy development of all children. The Council can convene high-level meetings and events to raise awareness among implementers, donors and others.

Congressional Leadership:

Through enacting priority legislation Congress should:

- 1) Fully fund and implement existing policies/programs focused on children and youth; support youth-led organizations with funding; and mandate youth engagement in new strategy development.
- 2) Increase U.S. foreign assistance programs that advance multisectoral outcomes and meaningful engagement;
- 3) Codify high-level, named positions with the authority to address holistic policies and programs for children and youth;
- 4) Mandate consistent, comparable metrics, (e.g. gender, disability, origin, refugee/migrant status, life stages) are collected and inform programs that achieve better outcomes for children and youth;
- 5) Require a child/youth analysis, similar to the gender analysis requirement, in order to receive USG funding, where child/youth well-being is the primary objective;
- 6) Ensure that 150 Account funding is flexible and encourages cross-governmental coordination and incentivizes holistic programming.

3) Enhanced Whole-of-Government Coordination: Cabinet- and Senior-level representation from all relevant agencies should facilitate participation and whole-of-government coordination to ensure transparency and accountability. This should include regular convenings between the White House and top agency leads authorized to make decisions on funding and programming to coordinate with senior officials. These leads should meet regularly to ensure that every sectoral and programmatic strategy (e.g. climate, disability, gender, food security, etc.) includes a children and youth focus, is informed by meaningful consultation with affected children and youth, ensures that all relevant government agencies have strategies that directly address the needs of children and youth and systematizes their engagement throughout policy and program cycles.

- **Intra- and cross-governmental coordination** should use participatory, evidence-based strategies and methodologies proven to make progress in protecting and empowering vulnerable children and families. This should include duplicating best practices, like PEPFAR.

- **Indicators for children and youth** should be embedded across USAID programs and throughout the program cycle (e.g. RFP requirements, F indicator) to determine the degree to which programming impacts children and youth, even if it is not the primary objective.
- **Require a Whole-of-Child impact statement**, similar to gender and environmental impact statements in the Automated Directive Systems (ADS).

4) Funding: No less than 25% of all U.S. foreign assistance funding should have, as its primary or secondary focus, an intention to improve children’s and youth’s lives, with no less than 10% having, as its primary objective, a focus on improving outcomes for those ages 0-24. While 25% of foreign assistance for those 24 and younger is bold and aspirational, it still falls short of the need and the fair share of foreign assistance that those who represent at least 35% of the population—if not more in many developing contexts—deserve to fully realize their potential. Moreover, this funding should be flexible and mandated in such a way that it encourages implementers’ abilities to address holistic child well-being. This funding could also go towards child-focused research and pilot programs that combine funding from multiple streams to improve impacts and outcomes. Initial funding to systematize and implement a whole-of-government approach for children and youth should come in the form of new or unallocated existing funding and should instruct agencies to integrate children and youth issues explicitly into their budget plans. The president’s annual budget request should also outline a plan for children and youth as a priority and the senior-level U.S. government lead should have sign-off authority on budget allocations across agencies, aligned with PEPFAR practices.

5) Meaningful Child & Youth Participation and Engagement: Youth voices should be integrated into policy and programming conception and implementation, including program design, policy formulation, and program evaluation. These consultations should not be singular requests but meaningful two-way communication between the U.S. government and young people, since those most affected must be centered in identifying solutions.

- **Training:** The Foreign Service Institute should create child- and youth-focused curricula and ensure that all staff are trained on child safeguarding and youth engagement best practices.
- **Youth advisory councils** should be set up in each USAID region and their engagement required to support programming design and monitoring.
- **Youth consultations** should include meaningful engagement 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 for youth activism, leadership and government engagement**, should be supported, including COVID-19 recovery and response processes.

Conclusion

The time to invest in children and young people globally is *now*. We have an unprecedented crisis and, therefore, an opportunity to make a whole-of-government approach to working with and for children and youth a top priority for the Biden-Harris Administration. We urge the administration to develop, fund and implement a holistic approach that engages young people systemically and meaningfully in solutions, leading to better outcomes.

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¹ Huebner, Gillian. (2018). *On the Side of Children and Youth in U.S. Government Foreign Policy and Assistance*. Report.

² UNICEF. (2014). *Children on the Front Line*. Accessed online at: https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/ccc_final_2014.pdf

³ 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>

⁴ CSIS. (April 15, 2015). *Global Development Forum: Breaking Down the 150 Account Preview*. Blog. Washington, DC. Accessed online at: <https://csisprospect.com/2015/04/20/global-development-forum-150-account/>

⁵ United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act of 2003, P.L. 108-25, 108th Cong., 1st sess. (May 27, 2003), §403(b).

⁶ First Focus. (2020). *Children’s Budget 2020*. Report. Accessed online at: <https://firstfocus.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ChildrensBudget2020.pdf>

⁷ First Focus. (2020). *Children’s Budget 2020*. Report. Accessed online at: <https://firstfocus.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ChildrensBudget2020.pdf>

⁸ 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/>

⁹ U.S. Department of State. *DREAMS Partnership*. Website. Accessed online at: <https://www.state.gov/pepfar-dreams-partnership/>

¹⁰ 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

¹¹ 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.

¹² Newhouse, D. and Fleury, M. *356 million children live in extreme poverty*. September 21, 2021. World Bank Blog. Accessed at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/356-million-children-live-extreme-poverty>

¹³ Hillis, S. D., Unwin, H. J. T., Chen, Y., Cluver, L., Sherr, L., Goldman, P. S., Ratmann, O., Donnelly, C. A., Bhatt, S., Villaveces, A., Butchart, A., Bachman, G., Rawlings, L., Green, P., Nelson, C. A., III, & Flaxman, S. (2021). Global minimum estimates of children affected by COVID-19-associated orphanhood and deaths of caregivers: a modelling study. *The Lancet*, 398(10298), 391–402. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(21\)01253-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(21)01253-8)

¹⁴ Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. *2020 Goalkeepers Report*. September 2020. Report. Accessed at: <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/goalkeepers/report/2020-report/#GlobalPerspective>

¹⁵ UNICEF. *COVID-19 and Children*. (March 2020). Accessed online at: <https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/>

¹⁶ UNICEF. *COVID-19 and Children*. (March 2020). Accessed online at: <https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/>