

Recommendations on Children and Youth for the Biden-Harris Administration

Why Sustained Investments in Children and Youth Matter

Children and youth constitute a significant percentage of the population in many low- and middle-income countries. When young people are hopeful and have access to opportunities, their communities and countries prosper. As the world's greatest resource, children and youth are drivers of social change efforts and the solution to a more inclusive and just world. Sustained investments in children and youth can transform countries; accelerate inclusive economic growth; and unlock the potential of young leaders, entrepreneurs, and innovators. Thriving economies and robust democracies all depend on healthy, educated, and empowered children and youth.

U.S. government foreign assistance programs have made significant progress in advancing the well-being of children and youth around the world. Since the launch of the child survival revolution 35 years ago, the child mortality rate has **decreased by 59%**. However, millions of children and youth still lack access to critical services in early childhood through adulthood. In 2019, **5.2 million children** under the age of five died—malnutrition contributed to approximately **45% of those deaths**. Conflict, violence, poverty, and climate change force millions of young people to flee their homes in search of a better life—children and adolescents account for **40% of the world's displaced population**. Urgent action is needed so that all children and youth have pathways to a successful adulthood, employment, civic engagement, and fulfillment.

To help communities and countries build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic and achieve the United Nations' **sustainable development goals** (SDGs), InterAction calls on the Biden-Harris Administration to pursue a whole children and youth approach across U.S. foreign assistance programs and policies. A whole child and youth approach will elevate the needs and voices of young people in policy discussions and programs that impact their daily lives.

What is a whole child and youth approach?

The range of sectoral issues and societal barriers impacting children and youth are all interrelated and cannot be addressed separately. Since children and youth do not lead their lives in sectoral silos, U.S. government programs, policies, and funding must be **integrated**, cross-sectoral, and support children and **youth** throughout all life stages. Children and youth must be empowered as agents of their own development and imbued with the knowledge and skills to create more inclusive societies.

Young people are our present and future. Without investing in their wellbeing, we risk losing decades of progress toward a more prosperous and equitable world.

Challenges for children and youth exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic

Children and youth confronted many structural barriers and challenges before the COVID-19 pandemic. They now face new and heightened risks that threaten to reverse decades of progress toward the SDGs. These risks include reduced access to health services; learning loss; poor nutrition; school dropout; constraints on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH); extreme poverty; social isolation; mental health consequences; and exposure to violence. Shrinking remittance flows and the economic crisis generated by COVID-19 threatens to hit children, youth, and families the hardest, as many



are employed in the informal sector and do not have legal recourse if terminated from their jobs. The number of children living in extreme poverty may soar to approximately **1.2 billion**. The pandemic has also exposed existing inequalities impacting children and youth and around the world. This is particularly true for the most marginalized young people—those with disabilities, girls, LGBT+ youth, and children uprooted by conflict or living outside of family care.

Global learning and employment crisis facing children and youth

Even before the pandemic struck, the world faced a learning crisis. In 2018, approximately **258 million children and youth** were out of school, including **128 million primary and secondary-aged children** in crisis-affected countries. An estimated **53% of children** in low- and middle-income countries could not read proficiently by age 10. In addition, limited access to quality secondary education and vocational training prevents youth from securing decent jobs and creating their own livelihoods. Youth unemployment remains a global challenge for many young women and men. The International Labor Organization estimates that there are more than **64 million unemployed youth** worldwide and 145 million young workers living in poverty. School closures due to COVID-19 have affected **nearly 91% of the world's student population**. For many children and youth, particularly those affected by conflict, crisis, and displacement, lack of access to early childhood centers and preschools exacerbate existing inequities. Children displaced from their homes often spend the bulk of their early years without foundational learning skills. The early years (0-6) are vital to brain development and setting children on a path to success in primary school as well as other life-long impacts.

COVID-19 has further limited access to these programs and services, with potential for severe impact to a generation of children and adolescents. Even as schools have reopened, UNESCO warns that **24 million children and youth**, including **11 million girls** may not return to the classroom. In fragile and conflict zones, adolescent girls are **90% more likely** to not attend school. Bridging the digital divide and prioritizing skills development and social and emotional learning opportunities are necessary to inclusive economic recovery efforts. Long-term investments in teachers and the learning curriculum will help children and youth—especially girls—acquire the skills and knowledge needed to succeed. Finally, even in a period marked by the pandemic, efforts to mainstream children with disabilities in the education sector must continue.

Violence against children and youth

Last year, **1 billion children and youth** experienced abuse, neglect, and exploitation, as well as physical, sexual, mental, and socio-emotional violence. Due to COVID-19-related lockdowns and restrictions, up to **85 million more children** could be exposed to physical, sexual, and emotional violence. As many as **2.5 million more girls** are at risk of child marriage and **adolescent pregnancies** are projected to reach 1 million by the end of 2020. School closures amid the pandemic hampered child protection services' and networks' ability to prevent, detect, and respond effectively and quickly to violence. Children and youth living through severe and prolonged adversity from conflict, disaster, and forced migration are at **high risk** for psychological trauma and toxic stress, which can disrupt healthy brain development and impair children's health, learning, and socio-emotional development. Children and adolescents with disabilities are at significantly greater risk of violence, and girls with disabilities face up to **10 times more gender-based violence** than their peers. In humanitarian settings, girls and women are at greater risk of gender-based violence. Young people are also at heightened risk of experiencing online violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, and cyberbullying as they spend more time online for education, entertainment, and socialization—often with limited caregiver supervision. In addition, the rising online activity among perpetrators puts children and youth at even greater risk. To overcome such challenges, the pandemic must spur innovative solutions and adaptations leveraging the **INSPIRE** framework (technical package that supports communities and countries in combating violence against children) and strengthening the social service workforce.



Crisis, conflict, and displacement

Nearly half of the world's **26 million refugees** are under the age of 18. With the average duration of displacement being 10 to 26 years, children and adolescents are often spending the bulk of their childhood and youth—including their critical learning years—without access to nutritious foods, healthcare, schooling, clean water, and safe spaces. As families are forced to flee their homes due to armed conflict, generalized violence, natural disaster or environmental degradation, young people are spending their entire childhoods and adolescent years in a state of displacement. The ‘double emergency’ induced by COVID-19 has only deepened these barriers for children and youth in crisis contexts. At the same time, child protection, including early and play based learning and education services in conflict and crisis settings, has been deprioritized in recent years as evidenced by statistics on funding provided by the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action and U.N. OCHA’s Financial Tracking System. Child protection should be prioritized and considered as a lifesaving intervention in humanitarian contexts. Across the humanitarian development conflict (or “triple”) nexus, an integrated set of crisis-sensitive services across health (including mental health), nutrition, education, skills development, sanitation and child protection sectors is needed. These services must be adaptable when responding to emergencies, starting in pregnancy and continuing throughout the life cycles for children and youth.

Climate change impacts on children and youth

The impacts of climate change and environmental degradation endanger children and youth and threaten their right to live in a clean, safe environment. Despite being least responsible for climate change, children and youth bear the brunt of its impact. Children under 5 comprise nearly **90% of those who fall ill** due to climate. By 2040, an estimated **25 million more children and youth** will be malnourished due to climate change and about 600 million will live in areas with extremely limited water resources. Climate change—coupled with economic instability and food insecurity and exacerbated by COVID-19—puts children and youth from the poorest households at heightened risk. This is striking at a time when more than **340 million children** lack essential micronutrients and adolescents are more likely to consume low-quality diets. Children and youth must be centered in global climate change and environmental strategies and programs. Any plans to combat climate change should include financing for the adaptation and reinforcement of services that children depend upon most, such as water, health, education, and nutrition.

Way Forward: Opportunities for advancing children and youth agenda

Every young person has rights and must be empowered and connected with the proper resources, tools, and skills to achieve their dreams for a brighter and more inclusive future. U.S. development and humanitarian programs must be guided by a child and youth rights framework and a coordinated, holistic strategy across sectors to ensure young people can succeed. Unfortunately, U.S. foreign assistance programs operate and are funded in sector silos, without 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, those who identify as LGBT+ and young people with disabilities and children and youth in crisis and displacement contexts. We must invest in children and youth now in the response to and recovery from COVID-19 to lift current and future generations out of poverty, advance gender equity, and build strong economies and inclusive communities. If enacted, the following recommendations would provide the Biden-Harris Administration with a unified and comprehensive whole-of-government approach to promote better outcomes for children and youth worldwide.

Recommendations

Bold Action for the World's Children and Youth: A Holistic U.S. Government Foreign Assistance Approach

Convene a White House Commission and Summit on Global Children and Youth Issues

- **To build back better and advance principled foreign assistance, the incoming Administration should convene a White House Commission** with a sunset provision and a White House Summit on the Global Conference on Children and Youth to build political will to elevate and integrate children and youth issues across the U.S. Government. This Commission and Summit should:
 - Frame and amplify commitments to cultivate the current and next generation of young leaders.
 - Reignite historical U.S. advances for child, youth, and family well-being.
 - Foster whole-of-government planning and implementation of policies and programs aimed at optimizing the healthy development of all children.

Appoint senior level leadership to elevate children and youth issues across the U.S. Government

- **Institute high-level leadership** with convening power across all of U.S. foreign assistance, robust funding, a clear mandate, and a strong interagency structure.
- **Empower and resource existing interagency efforts**, such as the Children in Adversity Working Group, to execute the [Advancing Protection and Care for Children in Adversity Strategy](#) and advance efforts to place children and youth in protective family care.
- **Invest in and strengthen multilateral engagement on children and youth issues.**
- **Revisit and update the U.S. government's [Youth in Development Policy](#).**

Meaningfully and Authentically Engage Youth in Government Decision-making Processes

- **Increase the meaningful participation** of children and youth, LGBT+ young people, those living with disabilities, and—especially those most marginalized—in U.S. foreign assistance policies, including President-elect Biden's Summit for Democracy.
- **Develop and implement structures to advance youth engagement** across the U.S. Government, including youth advisory councils to advise high-level leadership.
- **Create or expand upon pre-existing youth leadership programs** like the [Young African Leaders Initiative](#) and the [Young Leaders of the Americans Initiative](#) and support youth-led organizations.
- **Increase U.S. foreign assistance programs** that advance the civic engagement, leadership, and participation of youth in political spaces at the local, national, and regional levels.

Prioritize Inclusive Policies and Investments for Children and Youth

- **Track and report on the extent to which U.S. government investments reach marginalized children**, including children outside of family care, girls, those out of school, those experiencing and fleeing from violence and conflict, those who identify as LGBT+ and those with disabilities.
- **Disaggregate data across gender, disability, origin, refugee and migrant status, and life cycles** to inform programmatic metrics around the inclusion and achievement of better outcomes for children and youth.
- **Fully fund and implement the [2019-2023 Advancing Protection and Care for Children in Adversity Strategy](#)** and increase the funding for this critical strategy deployment.
- **Integrate the needs of children and youth across necessary foreign assistance programs**, ensuring relevant programs have specific objectives to reach vulnerable children and youth.

Fully Address the Needs of Children and Youth in the COVID-19 Response

- **Increase investments in humanitarian assistance and development programs** to address the needs of the most vulnerable children and youth from the direct and secondary effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Support countries to protect and advance the rights and well-being of children and youth** in the response to and recovery from the pandemic.
- **Partner with youth-led organizations** to promote sustainable, youth-led solutions.
- **Facilitate the active participation of adolescent girls, children with disabilities, and youth** in the development and implementation of COVID-19 response efforts, including addressing their nutrition, education, skills development, health (mental health, family planning, and reproductive health needs).

About the Children & Youth Initiative

InterAction launched the Children and Youth Initiative in 2020 to better integrate and elevate children and youth issues in our coalition's advocacy. InterAction's diverse Membership includes many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working and advocating on behalf of children and youth around the globe. Within InterAction, children and youth issues span working groups, sectors, and teams. InterAction utilizes its platform to highlight children and youth issues and support advocacy by its Member NGOs.

About InterAction

InterAction is a convener, thought leader, and voice for NGOs working to eliminate extreme poverty, strengthen human rights and citizen participation, safeguard a sustainable planet, promote peace, and ensure dignity for all people.

