

March 15, 2021

Dear Secretary Blinken and Acting Administrator Steele,

The United States government has long been a generous and influential partner in protecting the health, education, and safety of children across the humanitarian-development nexus. More children than ever before are surviving early childhood and the U.S. government contribution to this global success is irreplaceable.

We must, however, keep working to ensure that children—especially young children—are not just surviving adversity, but thriving. This requires moving beyond children's physical needs to addressing their developmental, emotional, and mental well-being, which are vital for health and economic outcomes later in life. To meet this challenge, we urge the United States to redouble its commitments to early childhood development (ECD).

Nowhere is this commitment more essential than in protracted crises and conflicts. This week, the world marks the grim milestone of 10 years of the Syrian conflict: an entire decade of violence, displacement, and loss for Syrian children and families. While the extended nature of the Syrian conflict is tragic, it is not unique. Rohingya families have sought refuge in Bangladesh for more than three decades; Somali refugees who originally arrived in the Dadaab refugee complex in the 1990s are now watching their grandchildren grow up there.

Children affected by crisis and conflict are spending their entire childhoods—including their critical learning years—without access to healthcare, education, adequate nutrition, clean water and sanitation, safety and playful experiences. Without the proper support from their earliest days, these children will lose out on their first and most important window for developing cognitive, language, motor, social, and emotional skills. Children with disabilities experience these deficits at even higher rates. Without those crucial skills, both their individual prospects as well as larger community goals of cohesion, resilience, and equity are under threat.

Despite these high stakes, ECD investments in crisis- and conflict-affected contexts remain insufficiently coordinated, of inconsistent quality, and dramatically under-resourced around the world. We, the undersigned, are working to address those inadequacies.

We urge the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development to join us in this effort. As a first step, we encourage the administration to convene a global conference on children in 2022, using the opportunity to draw a blueprint for a cohesive, child-centered international agenda and highlighting the specific needs of young children in crisis and conflict contexts.

Moving beyond planning and into action, we recommend three key steps for building a child-focused agenda for crisis response:

1 PRIORITIZE THE FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GLOBAL CHILD THRIVE ACT.

We urge USAID and State to prioritize the development of a comprehensive approach for supporting crisis-affected children and families, in line with the Global Child Thrive Act. This will require new efforts across the U.S. government to scale up the prioritization of ECD interventions and do so in an integrated manner. To effectively track implementation progress, it is important that programs are equipped to define, measure, monitor, and report on early childhood outcomes. This is essential for improving impact and coordination of ECD programming across the humanitarian-development nexus.

2 ALIGN USAID AND STATE DEPARTMENT INVESTMENTS WITH THE *NURTURING CARE FOR CHILDREN LIVING IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS* GUIDANCE.

There is significant evidence that early childhood interventions can help children weather traumatic events. There is a smaller, but growing, body of research about the specific ECD approaches that work best in crisis contexts. Future U.S. investments for implementing ECD in crisis and conflict settings should build on this evidence and reflect the strong program models that are expanding globally, including those proven to help children with disabilities.

USAID and State should jointly align their ECD plans with the international ECD community's 2021 *Nurturing care for children living in humanitarian settings* guidance, with an emphasis on the identified gaps in leveraging playful learning and equipping caregivers with necessary skills to provide nurturing care. Recognizing that delivery of integrated and high-quality programming may require additional or adjusted resources, the undersigned organizations welcome a dialogue with decision-makers to identify resource gaps and potential avenues for addressing them.

3 IDENTIFY AND GALVANIZE THE RESOURCES NEEDED TO SUPPORT YOUNG CHILDREN IN CRISIS CONTEXTS.

Globally, ECD programming across healthcare, education, adequate nutrition, clean water and sanitation, and safety makes up just over 3 percent of development assistance going to crisis-affected countries, with only a sliver of that specifically allocated for nurturing care and pre-primary education. In humanitarian assistance, only 2 percent of funding is dedicated to ECD. Given the foundational importance of ECD and the high proportion of children among those impacted by crisis and conflict, these allocations are far short of what is needed.

USAID and State should conduct a systematic accounting of the total amount of U.S. foreign assistance to early childhood development, both overall and specifically for those in crisis contexts. This will support the identification of shortfalls, provide direction for targeting additional resources, and enable appropriate oversight.

As a foreign assistance partner to other nations, the U.S. should also use its influence to mobilize domestic ECD resources in those partner countries. The U.S. government should use its membership and leadership positions in institutions such as the G7, G20, UN bodies, and the World Bank to encourage its partners to deepen financial commitments for young children in crisis and conflict contexts.

Continuing its history of leadership in this area, the United States has an opportunity and an obligation to drive increased international cooperation on ECD in crisis and conflict contexts. Bold steps now will pay tremendous dividends for vulnerable families and communities in the years to come. We look forward to partnering with you so that U.S. support to ECD abroad delivers on that potential.

Sincerely,

