

POLICY BRIEF: US foreign policy recommendations for children and youth affected by conflict

Authors: Sifa Kasonga, Policy Intern, ChildFund and Mena Ayazi, Program Officer, Search for Common Ground

Introduction

A child should never have to experience the realities of war. However, modern-day conflict is not restricted to the battlefield, and affects millions of children and youth globally. In fact, in 2019, 1.6 billion children lived in conflict-affected countries and 426 million children—over one in six—lived in conflict zones.ⁱ COVID-19 has only exacerbated the impacts on these young people, who are often separated from their families, fleeing violence, deprived of access to education and healthcare, and/or being recruited by armed groups. They are also at a greater risk of abuse, neglect, violence, and exploitation—posing serious threats to their lifelong development, learning, health, and well-being, and limiting their ability to reach their full potential.

According to the United Nations, the highest number of grave violations against children in conflict, such as recruitment, abduction, and sexual violence, were found in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.ⁱⁱ Young people constitute the majority of the population in many of these and many other countries affected by violent conflict. For example, in Sudan, the median age is 19 years old.ⁱⁱⁱ Civil war began there in 2013, and although a peace agreement was reached in 2018, violent unrest has continued until the present. This means young people there have spent half of their lives or more enduring insecurity and violence that comes with conflict. Even though they make up a large share of the population, young people are often largely perceived as passive victims who lack agency and need protection, or as perpetrators of conflict. They are rarely seen as active participants in community systems, or in formal peace processes. However, they are often at the forefront of mobilizing their communities, and promoting and maintaining peace.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the challenges facing young people. School closures and loss of family income have increased children's and youth's vulnerability to recruitment and re-recruitment in armed groups. For adolescent girls, entrenched gender norms and gender-based violence severely impact their security and ability to access healthcare and education. A recent report found that girls living in conflict are nearly 90% more likely than their counterparts in non-conflict countries to be out of secondary school, and almost two and a half times more likely to be out of primary school.^{iv} They are also at an increased risk of early pregnancy and forced/early marriage, and are less likely to be at tables where decisions are being made, despite their potentially key roles as peacemakers and community builders.

The Power of Youth Participation in South Sudan^{vi}

In 2019, young people from the South Sudan Civil Society Forum, alongside other organizations, launched a social media campaign, utilizing the hashtag #SouthSudanIsWatching, to put pressure on parties to the conflict and assert their rights as observers of the South Sudan High Level Revitalization Forum. Youth organizations were successful in being included and became representatives in the Addis Ababa peace negotiations.

US Foreign Policy Recommendations

Children and youth living in conflict-affected countries face a range of issues and barriers that are multifaceted and interrelated. They may face economic and food insecurity, as well as inadequate healthcare and social protection systems, and limited access to mental health and psychological services. As just one example, decades of conflict in Afghanistan, coupled with drought and a financial crisis, have severely impacted children's well-being and deprived them of education, food security, and health.^v The needs of these young people should be addressed holistically, but all too often U.S. foreign assistance delivers services and programs in silos that only address a single issue at a time.

A whole child approach to U.S. foreign policy would integrate U.S. government programs, policies, and funding and engage a wide range of actors and a support system, including family, school, and community, to help children and youth reach their full potential. Addressing all of their needs—such as education, nutrition, health, and livelihoods—throughout all their life stages, leaves no gaps in the kinds of support they receive. ChildFund works through the life-stages approach by tailoring interventions to meet children's and youth's holistic needs across three development stages, from 0-5, between 6-14 and 15-24 years. Young people's needs vary as they develop, therefore, adopting a life-stages approach reduces gaps and ensures that children are supported no matter their age. Finally, the whole child approach recognizes the importance of youth participation and aims to elevate youth voices and their needs in policy discussions and programs.

Gaps and Challenges

Actors in the conflict and peacebuilding space too often operate independently and in issue area silos. In many cases, implementing agencies have different mandates and funding sources, and funding allocations within foreign assistance makes it difficult for different agencies or accounts with overlapping mandates to coordinate with one another. This results in actors failing to adequately meet the needs of children and youth in conflict, leaving them at risk of life-long detrimental impacts. In addition, it is rare for U.S. foreign assistance to focus solely on children. In fact, a recent report found that in fiscal year 2021, the U.S. federal budget allocated only .08% for children.^{vii} Even where funding, policy and/or programming affecting children and youth globally exists, it is divided by sector and does not address all the needs of young people, especially in conflict and post-conflict settings, where children are perhaps at their most vulnerable. A whole child approach to U.S foreign policy is crucial to address the wide-ranging needs of children living in conflict-affected countries and conflict zones, and ensure that they are key partners in efforts to address those needs. Young people are not a homogenous group; they represent a wide range of diverse voices, experiences and identities, and as such can bring a perspective to the peacebuilding agenda within their communities that can produce sustainable, positive change.

Policy Recommendations

1. Enhanced coordination: There is a greater need for coordination, collaboration and clarity on the joint efforts to address all the needs of children in conflict. Cabinet- and senior-level staff from all relevant agencies, and humanitarian and development actors, should move beyond silos, adopt a more holistic, comprehensive approach to address short- and long-term needs, and facilitate joint planning and coordination for peacebuilding, humanitarian, and development interventions.

2. Engaging youth in decision-making processes: Young people are active agents for peace and security. The U.S. government should enable youth to use their agency by supporting inclusive and meaningful youth participation in peacebuilding and conflict prevention. USAID should set up a youth advisory council specifically on children and youth living in conflict to inform and support programming design, monitoring, and evaluation. Young peacebuilders should be engaged at the grassroots level in an enabling and safe environment that offers multiple, sustainable ways for them to participate. Passing the Youth, Peace, and Security Act, which has strong support in the humanitarian community, would accomplish recommendations 1, 2 and 3 by mandating an interagency youth strategy, placing youth in top-level discussions in the U.S. government, and working to close the funding gap for youth peacebuilders. Inclusive, meaningful youth participation will empower them to be future community leaders.

3. Funding: COVID-19 continues to exacerbate vulnerabilities for children and youth living in conflict settings. Increased and flexible foreign assistance to address their holistic well-being is needed now more than ever. In fiscal year 2021, only 0.08% of the U.S. federal budget was allocated for children—an amount that is severely inadequate. Without additional funding, these children will not have their basic needs met, nor will they reach their full potential.

4. COVID-19 response: According to UNICEF, around 1.8 billion children live in 104 countries where violence prevention and response services have been disrupted due to COVID-19.^{viii} Child protection funding within humanitarian response is low and insufficient. Actions should be taken to ensure that adequately-funded child and youth protection is prioritized and included across all aspects of the COVID-19 response, to reach young people living in conflict-affected countries.

Conclusion

For young people living in conflict areas, violence and insecurity have devastating impacts on all aspects of their lives. Through a whole child approach, their needs can be addressed holistically, and peace and security efforts can prioritize the inclusion of young people as change agents within their communities. The needs of young people around the world are rising—and the time to act is now.

For more information, contact Rachel Clement at RClement@ChildFund.org.

i Prio. (2019). Children Affected by Armed Conflict, 1990-2019. Report. Accessed online at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/children-affected-armed-conflict-1990-2019>

ii United Nations (2021). Children and Armed Conflict-Report of the Secretary-General. Report. Accessed online at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/children-and-armed-conflict-report-secretary-general-a75873-s2021437-enarruzh>

iii United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2021). Humanitarian Needs Overview: Sudan. Report. Accessed online at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SDN_2021HNO.pdf

iv Plan International. (2021). Adolescent Girls in North West South West Cameroon on Conflict and COVID-19. Report. Accessed online at: <https://plan-international.org/publications/listen-us-adolescent-girls-conflict-and-covid-19>

v United Nations Children's Fund. (2022). UNICEF Afghanistan Humanitarian Situation Report: January-December 2021. Report. Accessed online at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/unicef-afghanistan-humanitarian-situation-report-january-december-2021>

vi Youth, Peace and Security (2019). We are Here: An integrated approach to youth-inclusive peace processes. Accessed online at: <https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2019-07/Global%20Policy%20Paper%20Youth%20Participation%20in%20Peace%20Processes.pdf>

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

viii United Nations Children's Fund. (2020). Protecting Children from violence in the time of COVID-19. Accessed online at: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/protecting-children>