



MOVING BEYOND SILOS:

How a whole child approach can help transform vulnerable communities

Introduction

Definitions of success in development and humanitarian programming too often focus on specific sector outputs, such as how many people gain first-time access to clean water, how many children are immunized or in school, or how many bed nets are distributed to help prevent malaria. While these indicators are important to address specific needs, they don't reflect holistic child development. **Goals like well-being, safety, and economic stability are vital to the long-term health and flourishing of a child and their community.** But they're multifaceted and difficult to quantify. A focus on broader outcomes, in addition to easy-to-measure outputs for children, is a necessary paradigm shift to direct efforts toward a whole child approach that can equip children, families, and communities to lift themselves out of poverty.

A whole child approach to foreign policy engages a wide range of actors and a broad spectrum of support systems, including family, school, and community, to help children and youth reach their full potential. This approach equally values all aspects of a child's well-being—social, emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual, and creative—to ensure children become active citizens and lifelong learners. It also leverages the full force of the U.S. government's diplomacy, development, and humanitarian aid, and relies upon strong holistic metrics for success and interagency coordination.

World Vision views the well-being of children in holistic terms. We tackle poverty at its roots. Our integrated approach includes water, healthcare, education, child protection, and income generation so every child can grow into who God created them to be. Helping improve a child's well-being involves healthy individual development, positive relationships, and a context that provides safety, justice and accountability, and participation in civil society.¹

OVERVIEW

A whole child approach to foreign policy engages a wide range of actors and a broad spectrum of support systems, including family, school, and community, to help children and youth reach their full potential.



Background and challenges

Why hasn't the whole child agenda been implemented by relevant agencies and donors? Lack of coordination, inflexible funding mechanisms, and lack of research and decision-making are among the hurdles to overcome.

› Siloed funding and programming

Development programs are often segmented by sector, agency, funding stream, participant age, or type. The structure of government agencies and departments—and how funding is allocated by Congress to fit that structure—prescribe funding levels for certain programs and lack transfer authority and flexibility for USAID and other agencies serving children globally. Siloed approaches focus more on outputs (how much money was spent) than on outcomes (how children and families benefit holistically in the long term).

Additionally, at the USAID mission level, funds are often obligated by sector (e.g., global health, education, and food security), and cannot always be commingled. This creates unique challenges for comprehensive approaches to child well-being at the local level and limits long-term efficiency and effectiveness. While commingling funds is possible, it takes a deep understanding of the complete needs of children with the foresight to pull funding from multiple sources to form a holistic program.

› Limited funding for child-focused programs

Very little funding across the U.S. foreign assistance landscape is focused specifically on children. According to the 2020 budget report from First Focus on Children, just 0.11% of the U.S.'s international funding is invested in children. Globally, World Vision's "Counting Pennies 2" report, an analysis of overseas development assistance to end violence against children, found that less than 1% of assistance went to ending violence against children in 2018—and even more children are now at risk of violence due to the effects of COVID-19.² To truly reach the most vulnerable children and their families, foreign assistance programs must consider children and youth even if their mandate has a sectoral focus such as food security or climate change. Without a specific focus on children, foreign assistance programs do not always allow for the type of integration that can layer and maximize the impact of approaches with the child at the core.

› Need for proper coordination

To break through sector silos and utilize funding most efficiently, planning and coordination is necessary to ensure that approaches are addressing the holistic needs of vulnerable children and their families. To make coordination a reality, high-level political will and engagement must be present to prioritize and develop common objectives and outcomes for holistic child well-being, and to provide a mandate for key stakeholders to achieve long-lasting and sustained coordination around the shared objective of supporting the whole child.

WORLD VISION PROGRAM EXAMPLES



SYRIA RESPONSE (FY18–FY20)³

World Vision's response in Syria focused on the protection and healthy development of children by keeping them safe from infection and disease, improving learning outcomes, and strengthening relationships within the core family and community to build resilience.

Critical crosscutting programs:

- › We supported families with healthcare, access to clean water and sanitation, and hygiene behavior-change programming.
- › The program established life skills and literacy training for crisis-affected girls and boys by providing equitable access to quality formal and nonformal education.
- › Staff conducted violence prevention programming with psychosocial services, supporting parents and caregivers to protect children within their family environment.

DREAMS (determined, resilient, empowered, AIDS-free, mentored, and safe)

DONOR: President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR)

COUNTRIES: Eswatini, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe

The DREAMS public–private partnership is one of the best embodiments of integrated programming to address the multisectoral risks adolescents face to good health. The objective of this approach is to transform social norms and practices; reduce the risk of early pregnancy, HIV, and gender-based violence, including child marriage; and to support girls to stay in school through a package of holistic programs that address specific vulnerabilities.

Critical crosscutting programs in World Vision's Uganda DREAMS project (FY16–FY19)^{4,5}

- Adolescent girls were equipped to lead an early warning system that used evidence-based monitoring systems to identify critical vulnerabilities and risk factors such as attendance patterns, academic performance, financial difficulties, incidences of sexual abuse, and other behavior indicators.
- Stay in School committees combined peers, parents, community leaders, and educators to utilize the early warning system and find solutions with families to keep their girls in school. Of over 40,000 participants, 99.7% retained their attendance in school.
- Health monitoring, such as HIV testing, and health training, such as teaching girls how to use sanitary pads, helped increase school attendance rates.
- Faith leaders were trained on how to advocate for girls' rights, increase school retention, and teach girls to prevent HIV infection.

Areas of focus for the whole child approach

➤ Healthy, holistic development

Addressing barriers to the healthy and holistic development of children and youth can maximize the impact of foreign assistance programs and the limited funding that fuels them. For example, access to clean water and sanitation can serve as a foundation for strong nutrition outcomes but also has added benefits, such as cutting out the need to collect water, sometimes at a great distance, which can keep children (especially girls) from attending school or put them at risk of violence.

➤ Family and household strengthening

Reaching children with holistic programs to bolster their well-being requires a focus on families and caregivers as the primary socioecological context that children interact with. Addressing the physical and emotional needs of caregivers is critical to the whole child agenda. A safe, healthy, and financially secure home prevents negative behaviors and coping mechanisms (such as child labor and child marriage), keeps children out of orphanages, and supports families to be more resilient to future shocks and stressors.⁶

➤ Child and youth participation

Child participation is a universally recognized human right. It asserts that children and young people have the right to freely express their views and that there is an obligation to listen to children's views. This facilitates their participation in all matters affecting them.

➤ Reaching the most vulnerable

In many contexts, children are central to community life and can be a positive force to sustain community involvement. Research shows investing in child and caregiver well-being early in a child's life can lead to greater gains in education and future income levels, a reduction of risky adolescent behaviors and expenditure on welfare services, and improved civic health and governance. Advocating for the well-being of the most vulnerable children is a moral responsibility as well as a strategic one. Addressing their needs in a holistic manner creates long-term benefits for children, their communities, and their countries.⁷



Whole child policy recommendations

Implementing a whole child agenda should be a top priority for the U.S. government in fully addressing the needs of vulnerable children around the world. To achieve this, World Vision proposes the following policy recommendations.

1 Appoint high-level leadership to oversee implementation of a whole child approach

A position complementing the Special Advisor for Children in Adversity—to prioritize child well-being throughout the U.S. foreign aid structure and coordinate across all U.S. government agencies implementing foreign assistance programming for children and youth—would enhance collaboration, effectiveness, and outcomes.

2 Increase funding for child-focused programs

Increased, flexible funding and an encouragement to use this funding to address holistic child well-being would allow relevant agencies to fund special projects such as research and innovative pilot programs, as well as commingle funding where appropriate to improve program impact and outcomes for children.

3 Create a White House Global Children and Youth Summit

A high-level summit will raise awareness of the challenges facing vulnerable children and families around the globe, as it signals the prioritization of this issue for other nations and serves as a catalyst for making progress quickly in foreign policy and creating increased capacity for addressing challenges.

4 Recognize child protection and education programs as life-saving

A whole child approach, with child protection and education programs recognized as life-saving, would elevate these efforts in humanitarian response and put its funding and deployment on par with other programs.

5 Fully implement evidence-based strategies

Implementation of participatory, evidence-based strategies and methodologies increases the ability to address the protection and empowerment of vulnerable children and their families and should be central to the development and implementation of a whole child agenda.

6 Ensure the meaningful participation of children and youth

Hearing from child and youth participants in U.S. foreign assistance programs and supporting a platform for their activism not only allows for better design for programmatic impact, but also empowers youth to be the future leaders of their communities. Youth advisory councils set up by each USAID region could support the design, monitoring, and evaluation of programming at the mission level.

Conclusion

Creating an environment where the U.S. government approaches foreign policy with the whole child at the center is not an easy task, yet it is one we know will have long-term impact on achieving development outcomes and creating a better world for children and their families. We must now begin to move toward child-focused foreign assistance and build on the programs and policies that successfully foster integration. This focus will bring strategic alignment to foreign assistance funding across the U.S. government, making it more effective, efficient, and impactful.

References

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- ⁴ <https://www.worldvision.org/dreams>
- ⁵ DREAMS, Uganda: *Strengthening School-Community Accountability for Girls' education (SAGE)*, https://www.worldvision.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/SAGE-DREAMS_final_report.pdf
- ⁶ *Aftershocks: A Perfect Storm* <https://www.wvi.org/publications/report/coronavirus-health-crisis/covid-19-aftershocks-perfect-storm>
- ⁷ 2 Donahue, J. and Mwewa, L., *Learning from Community Experiences and Perceptions*, USAID DCOF (2006).