

# Action Sheet

## JANUARY 2020

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*As missionary disciples, we are called to urgently respond to the needs of migrants and refugees. Today, a staggering seventy million people are currently displaced, many as a result of conflict and violence. Families are forced to flee in search of safety. Children suffer especially from this experience and often have long-term emotional, physical and cognitive setbacks.*

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### ACTION

Our action this month will be to write our U.S. Senators and ask them to cosponsor the Global Child Thrive Act (**S. 2715**) introduced by Sens. Coons (D-DE) and Blunt (R-MO) or thank them if they already cosponsored the bill and ask them to take the next step to support it.

### LASER TALK

Since 1990, U.S. international aid has saved nearly 100 million children. But children need to do more than survive; they need to thrive.

Worldwide it's estimated that 31 million children have been forcibly displaced from their homes. More than half of the world's estimated 22 million refugees are children. These children will have their development disrupted and grow smaller brains than children who have not experienced the trauma of fleeing violence. Early Childhood Development or ECD is a way to help migrant and refugee children, and all children, thrive despite challenges brought on by forced migration and poverty.

Currently, the U.S. government doesn't integrate ECD activities into international programs for children and families. Our Catholic faith compels us to care for life from conception to natural death. That means giving each child a strong foundation from which to reach his or her God-given potential.

Will you join Reps. Castro (D-TX) and Fitzpatrick (R-PA) lead sponsors of H.R. 4864 or Sens. Coons (D-DE) and Blunt (R-MO) lead sponsors of S. 2715 in cosponsoring and passing the Global Child Thrive Act directing the administration to integrate Early Childhood Development activities into international child-focused programs, thereby improving the lives of vulnerable children?

### BACKGROUND

Our work at Catholic Relief Services focuses on the most vulnerable children, helping their families ensure they reach school age healthy and well-nourished, intellectually curious, socially confident and equipped with a solid foundation for life-long learning. Using private funding, CRS invests in ECD to ensure that health and nutrition services, responsive caregiving, safety and security, and opportunities for early learning are available for the most vulnerable children in countries such as Kenya, Malawi and Zambia. We have developed a process for integrating ECD into ongoing programming that reaches children during their first 1,000 days of life up through the age of 8 years old and have implemented that programming in 20 countries around the world, serving 1.36 million children and their families.

For children who have seen the devastation of war and violence in their communities or have been forced to flee their homes due to that violence—their development is severely hindered due to their trauma. In fact, we know more today about the effects of toxic stress on a young brain. For example, the chaos and fear associated with life on the move can directly disrupt a child's brain development given that when a child feels unsafe, his or her brain will spend more time focusing on survival,

rather than on new areas of growth and exploration. Children experiencing toxic stress will grow smaller brains with fewer neural connections than children who are not traumatized; they may experience speech or reading delays, and later suffer from depression, anxiety, and behavioral issues. In addition, migrants often have a lack of adequate nutrient intake and limited access to health care. This can be particularly devastating if children experience these deprivations during key developmental windows, such as the first years of life. Studies have found that forced migration during early childhood was significantly associated with poor cognitive well-being later in life. ECD is a way to help children thrive despite these types of challenges. CRS is supporting children who have been displaced by violence by supporting the creation of classrooms and child-friendly spaces where children can have access to education that brings stability, and opportunities for growth and expression to heal from the trauma they have experienced.

**Moving from Surviving to Thriving—A New Approach and Ask for Congress:** According to the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, “a staggering 43 percent of children under five years of age—an estimated 250 million—living in low- and middle-income countries are at risk of suboptimal development caused by poverty, nutritional deficiencies, and inadequate learning opportunities.” Experts now recommend targeting caregivers and children with ECD during the first years of life to ensure children living in adversity do not fall below their potential.

U.S. government efforts to assist children in low income countries have often focused on single areas of vulnerability—for example, HIV or malnutrition or child labor. Although such efforts have produced substantial benefits, this diffused approach has resulted in a fragmented legislative, funding and programmatic response for children. The incorporation of ECD interventions as core components of U.S. government programs across all child-focused sectors would multiply outcomes for children and ensure the most effective use of precious foreign aid resources. The U.S. Government is well-positioned to mobilize around a sensible and strategic global agenda for children because of its diplomatic outreach, significant investments in international development, and technical expertise and research capabilities embedded within key agencies. However, it requires a Congressional directive for the administration to take on Early Childhood Development in a comprehensive, holistic way.

## TAKE ACTION: Write a letter to your U.S. Senators

- 1. Go to the website of one of your U.S. Senators and see how they want you to write them** (e.g. by filling out an online form or by email. If you don't have a smartphone or laptop with you, you can address your letter to: Sen. \_\_\_\_\_, U.S. Senate, Washington, DC 20510.
- 2. Introduce yourself:** Provide personal information to root yourself in the community (I am active in my local parish, I volunteer at our local food bank, etc.) and briefly share why this issue matters to you. Share connections to your faith, activities you're involved with in your parish or diocese to help children and families, etc. Share if you've visited a related CRS program.
- 3. Find something for which to thank the Senator:** If you cannot find anything related to international issues or programs caring for vulnerable children, thank them for their service in Congress.
- 4. Make the ask:** Ask your U.S. Senator to cosponsor the Global Child Thrive Act (S. 2715) introduced by Sens. Coons (D-DE) and Blunt (R-MO). [If your Senator is already a cosponsor](#), thank them and ask them to take a next step in their support of the legislation (e.g. encouraging other Senate colleagues to cosponsor or speaking to the key decision-makers on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations to urge consideration of the bill).
- 5. Provide some background to support your argument:** In your own words, share why it is important to integrate Early Childhood Development activities across international child-focused programs to multiply positive outcomes for vulnerable children. Visit the body of this Action Sheet to support your argument.
- 6. Repeat the 'ask', say thank you, and request a response:** Leave your name, address, phone number and email address so they can get back to you with their decision.

