**Investing in Youth: A Development and Foreign Policy Imperative**

Submitted on behalf of the Alliance for International Youth Development (AIYD)

*The devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified a pre-existing global mega-trend: a surging global youth population that has huge potential both to drive positive transformation and unleash widespread disruption. The United States can either invest in these 1.2 billion young people—who carry unprecedented power to promote economic growth, good governance, social justice, and the spread of values Americans cherish—or, we risk having to contain rampant instability, the spread of disinformation and pernicious ideas, growing intolerance, and rising violence.*

COVID-19’s secondary effects disproportionately disadvantage youth. The pandemic has kept nearly [1.6 billion students out of school](https://www.worldbank.org/en/data/interactive/2020/03/24/world-bank-education-and-covid-19). [One in six young people](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/youth-employment/publications/WCMS_753026/lang--en/index.htm) has stopped working since the onset of the pandemic; and social and political unrest– often driven by youth protests– are spreading in Nigeria, Thailand, Lebanon, Iraq, India, Peru, and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the global youth population has not yet peaked and is expected to reach over [1.4 billion persons around 2065](https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2019/08/WYP2019_10-Key-Messages_GZ_8AUG19.pdf). The youth population in the poorest countries is projected to [increase 62 percent by 2050](https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2019/08/WYP2019_10-Key-Messages_GZ_8AUG19.pdf).

How well these young people transition to adulthood, and how well their governments integrate them economically, politically, and socially, will determine whether countries with surging youth populations thrive or implode. To ensure the former, we must act now, focusing on four critical issues:

1. **Educate:** To prepare young people for employment, civic engagement, and rewarding lives, young people need access to education and skills training. USAID should invest in better quality teaching, smoother school-to-work transitions, and vocational/technical training geared to employment. Children and adolescents in poorer nations are more likely to never return to school once they are sent home by the pandemic. Investments we make now in digital and distance learning, including increased connectivity, will pay dividends as countries recover.
2. **Engage**: Investing in young people’s leadership development is more important than ever as they recover from the impact of COVID-19 on their communities, as well as the absence of US leadership over the past four years. USAID, State Department, Peace Corps, and MCC can create these opportunities by investing in the leaders that will positively shape communities and societies in the future. The USG currently has an array of siloed leadership development and exchange programs that could be more closely knitted together with a larger bipartisan initiative to invest in developing the types of citizens and leaders countries will need in the future. More broadly, young people need their grievances addressed, enhanced capabilities to resolve conflicts and promote tolerance, and positive channels to focus their energy and potential. Large-scale public service and civic engagement programs are needed to reinforce civic values of working together to overcome common challenges. Programs should invest in developing the types of citizens and leaders countries will need in the future.
3. **Employ:** A dynamic private sector that fosters innovation and creates jobs for youth is essential to sustain stability and prosperity during COVID recovery. Recovery strategies must enable young entrepreneurs to easily access capital to build enterprises that can jump-start economic recovery. They must invest in initiatives that expand access to jobs. They must give youth– at scale – the training, skills, and opportunities they need to promote sustainable growth.
4. **Enable:** Without access to adequate physical and mental health care, food, housing, substance abuse interventions, and other basic needs, young people and their societies will not be able to achieve their potential. And as hope in a better future fades, young people will also be more susceptible to manipulation by gangs, extremists, and other malign social forces. Fundamental development strategies in these and other areas should explicitly include a youth focus and tailor programming to meet youth needs.

Engaging Youth to Support Major Biden Administration Priorities

The sheer size, concentration, and energy of global youth guarantee that they will be pivotal in advancing Biden Administration policy priorities. For this reason, the USG should incorporate a youth focus across both its development and foreign policy strategies. To give just a few examples:

* **COVID-19 Recovery:** Youth are a key vector to spreading the virus. They are also central to recovery. Youth have already led initiatives to guide their communities through the COVID-19 crisis by producing masks, volunteering to deliver food, developing new treatments for the disease, and more.
* **Climate Change:** Youth are leading the charge to slow climate change and pressure governments and companies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. They can drive the innovation, policy, and behavior changes that are required to combat climate change over the short and long terms.
* **Promoting Democracy and Countering Resurgent Authoritarianism:** Whether youth embrace democratic values or succumb to authoritarian influences will prove central to the success of President-elect Biden’s renewed focus on supporting democracy. Youth and young leaders must become engaged as active participants and drivers in democratic governance, effective and independent civil society, and as agents of fighting misinformation and disinformation.
* **Fighting Corruption:** A new generation of politicians and business leaders are pushing for more inclusive and transparent decision-making, and youth activists are at the forefront demanding accountability for corrupt governments. Empowering them will be essential to achieving lasting change in this area.
* **Peace and Security:** Youth are the key targets of extremists, insurgents, gangs, and criminal networks. Building their resilience to these forces, and equipping them with the tools they need to drive positive change, should be at the center of strategies to counter extremism, violence, and crime.
* **Diversity and Inclusion:** Youth will be critical to promoting tolerance, diversity, and inclusion along many aspects of identity including but not limited to race, ethnicity, religion, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, and ability. Recognizing the intersectionality of youth and these dimensions of human identity will be key to broader social acceptance and increased opportunities.

**Organizing for Success**

To successfully integrate a youth focus into development and diplomacy, the Biden administration should:

* Elevate the focus on youth across foreign affairs agencies by explicitly integrating a youth focus into all relevant embassy, regional, country, and functional bureau strategies.
* Invest in the expertise and infrastructure needed to execute effective strategies by:
  + Continuing to expand the number of youth advisors/specialists in key USAID missions and embassies, and requiring them to form local youth networks to advise USAID missions
  + Requiring youth experts in all major USAID operating units, State Department regional and functional bureaus, MCC, and the Development Finance Corporation
  + Ensuring a youth focus in public-private partnership initiatives
  + Investing in training for career staff to develop technical expertise in inclusive development, with a focus on gender, youth, and other aspects of identity
* Invest in leadership champions, and connective tissue across and between agencies. This should include a senior position at USAID and State, as well as a coordinator at the NSC focused on a robust integrated strategy for youth engagement. Leadership should have should have sufficient staff, budget, and leadership support.
* Resource youth initiatives adequately. Ensure these resources are spread between activities driven by Headquarters as well as by embassies and missions.
* Track the level of investment in youth across sectors and regions in all relevant agencies: USAID, State, MCC, DFC, etc. through the F-indicator framework.
* Invest in local youth and youth-serving organizations globally, as well as US government driven activities.

For more information, please contact the Alliance for International Youth Development co-chairs Kristin Lord, President and CEO of IREX ([klord@irex.org](mailto:klord@irex.org)) and Patrick Fine CEO of FHI360 ([PFine@fhi360.org](mailto:PFine@fhi360.org)), or co-chair emeritus Susan Reichle (srechle@iyfnet.org)