



1400 Eye Street NW Suite 650 | Washington, DC 20005 | t: 202.657.0670 | f: 202.657.0671 | [www.firstfocus.org](http://www.firstfocus.org)

October 15, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Honorable Antony Blinken  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Honorable Samantha Power  
U.S. Agency for International Development  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20523

White House COVID-19 Response Team  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden, Secretary Blinken, Administrator Power, and White House COVID-19 Response Team,

I am writing on behalf of First Focus on Children, a bipartisan children's advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal budget and policy decisions. Thank you for the work you have done to increase access to COVID-19 vaccines around the world. We urge you to create a plan for getting children of all ages around the globe to receive the vaccine as equitably and effectively as possible.

Globally, children have carried some of the heaviest burdens of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic crisis. During the pandemic, children have faced increased food insecurity and poverty.<sup>1</sup> For example, approximately 80 million children under 18 were unable to access critical vaccines.<sup>2</sup> School closures due to the pandemic have affected 1.6 billion children, and at least one third of children globally have been unable to access remote learning.<sup>3</sup> Sixty-six percent of countries reported disruption in violence prevention programming, meaning that 1.8 billion children faced increased risk of forced labor, sexual exploitation, and abuse in the home.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated physical and sexual violence

---

<sup>1</sup> *COVID-19 and Children*, UNICEF, [https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/?utm\\_source=UNICEF%20Data&utm\\_medium=homepage&utm\\_campaign=COVID19-hub-unicef-data-hero-image](https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/?utm_source=UNICEF%20Data&utm_medium=homepage&utm_campaign=COVID19-hub-unicef-data-hero-image) (accessed Oct. 7, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

against girls.<sup>5</sup> UNICEF estimates that the pandemic will push 142 million children into poverty, most of whom are in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.<sup>6</sup> Updated data from a study published in *The Lancet* now estimates that 4.9 million children worldwide have lost a parent, custodial grandparent or primary caregiver because of the pandemic.<sup>7,8</sup> That is **1 child every six seconds losing a caregiver due to COVID-19.**

### Equitable Access to the Vaccine

As of July 7, 2021, 3.3 billion COVID-19 vaccines doses have been administered globally, but disproportionately in high income countries.<sup>9</sup> While 51% of adults receiving at least one dose are in high income countries, only 15% of adults in middle-and low-income countries have received at least one dose.<sup>10</sup> When broken down by region, adults in the African, Eastern Mediterranean, and Southeast Asia regions are the least likely to be vaccinated, exposing wide gaps between their vaccination rates and that of adults in America, Europe, and Western Pacific.<sup>11</sup> In particular, the African continent has the lowest proportion of the population vaccinated against COVID-19 at 2 percent. Except for Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan, the bottom 25 countries in terms of vaccination rates are on the African continent.<sup>12</sup>

Inequitable access to COVID-19 vaccines also disproportionately affects regions of the world with the largest populations of children and youth. There are more than 2.2 billion children in the world, and nearly 2 billion of them live in a developing country.<sup>13</sup> On the African continent, children under 18 make up half of the population, and that ratio is growing—it is estimated that 40% of the world’s children will live on the continent by 2050.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, South Asia is home to 627 million children under 18, or 36 percent of its population.<sup>15</sup> Even if all adults in those regions gain access to vaccines and get vaccinated, countries simply cannot meet the WHO targets of 70 percent vaccinated by mid-2022<sup>16</sup> without children and youth. As vaccines for children 12 and older have been approved and reports indicate that vaccines for children six months and older may soon be available, our government must increase its efforts to support equitable global access to the vaccine now.

The challenges of vaccinating children against COVID-19 will look very different from the challenges in vaccinating adults. Our nation must support other countries in developing vaccination plans tailored to children. These plans must include effective distribution, adequate and planned funding, and public education campaigns.

---

<sup>5</sup> *COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls*, UN Women (2020), <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006>

<sup>6</sup> *COVID-19 and Children*, *supra* note 1.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Hillis et al., *Children: The Hidden Pandemic 2021*, *The Lancet* (July 31, 2021), [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)01253-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)01253-8/fulltext).

<sup>8</sup> *Orphanhood, Feb 29, 2020 to Oct 4, 2021*, Imperial College London, [https://imperialcollegelondon.github.io/orphanhood\\_trends/?country=IND~BRA~PER~ZAF~USA](https://imperialcollegelondon.github.io/orphanhood_trends/?country=IND~BRA~PER~ZAF~USA).

<sup>9</sup> Anna Rouw et al., *Tracking Global COVID-19 Vaccine Equity*, Kaiser Family Foundation (July 21, 2021), <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/tracking-global-covid-19-vaccine-equity/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Children in the World*, Humanium, <https://www.humanium.org/en/children-world/> (accessed Oct. 7, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> *Generation 2030 Africa 2.0*, UNICEF (Nov. 2017), <https://data.unicef.org/generation-2030-africa-2-0/>.

<sup>15</sup> *Children in South Asia*, UNICEF <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/children-south-asia#:~:text=The%20situation%20for%20children%20in%20population%20of%201.82%20billion2> (accessed Oct 7, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> *WHO Director-General's Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing on COVID-19*, World Health Organization (Sept. 8, 2021), <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---8-september-2021#:~:text=WHO's%20global%20targets%20remain%20to,the%20middle%20of%20next%20year>.

## Distribution and Production Support

We are grateful to the administration for supporting a Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) waiver for COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>17</sup> We urge the administration to deploy more of its vaccine surplus abroad while supporting the production of vaccines in other countries. We appreciate the administration's first donation of 25 million doses in June,<sup>18</sup> and its commitment to donate 1.1 billion doses of vaccine.<sup>19</sup>

We also urge the administration to develop and encourage other countries to develop a detailed plan for distribution of vaccines across the world, particularly child-specific plans. The U.S. COVID-19 Global Response and Recovery Framework, while acknowledging the pandemic's secondary impacts on children's safety and learning, does not include children in its first objective to accelerate widespread and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>20</sup> As mentioned earlier, given the large number of children and youth in regions around the world, this oversight will undermine the government's goals. Any global COVID-19 response plan must include children, including a distribution plan to meet children where they are. While there are logistical "last mile" challenges for reaching children in regions around the world, the United States can build on innovative initiatives used in other contexts for hard-to-reach populations. For example, Samawat Energy in Somalia uses cell phones, solar energy, and other technology to reach patients where they are and provide them with information.<sup>21</sup>

## Funding

We applaud the Biden Administration for understanding that budgets display our values. Our nation's values are reflected by investing in global vaccine response, including the commitment of at least \$7.1 billion for global testing and vaccine readiness, expanding manufacturing in developing countries, and global pandemic preparedness.<sup>22</sup> It is critical that children receive a sufficient share of that funding, including funds to manufacture vaccines approved for children, child-specific vaccine distribution plans, and addressing the secondary impacts of the pandemic on children.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating impacts on all aspects of children's lives. The scale of this impact has not been seen since the AIDS epidemic.<sup>23</sup> At that time, the United States committed 10 percent of funding for the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, to support children impacted by HIV and AIDS. Our government can and should make a similar monetary commitment to address the needs of children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our government must commit to funding diverse initiatives that are particular to various regions of the world, including efforts led by youth. As Yasmin Sheikhdon, co-Founder of Samawat Energy said, "At the

---

<sup>17</sup> *Statement from Ambassador Katherine Tai on the COVID-19 Trips Waiver*, Office of the United States Trade Representative (May 5, 2021), <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2021/may/statement-ambassador-katherine-tai-covid-19-trips-waiver>.

<sup>18</sup> *Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration Unveils Strategy for Global Vaccine Sharing, Announcing Allocation Plan for the First 25 Million Doses to be Shared Globally*, White House (June 3, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/03/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-unveils-strategy-for-global-vaccine-sharing-announcing-allocation-plan-for-the-first-25-million-doses-to-be-shared-globally/>.

<sup>19</sup> *Fact Sheet: President Biden's Global COVID-19 Summit: Ending the Pandemic and Building Back Better*, White House (Sept. 22, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/22/fact-sheet-president-bidens-global-covid-19-summit-ending-the-pandemic-and-building-back-better/>.

<sup>20</sup> *U.S. COVID-19 Global Response and Recovery Framework*, White House (July 1, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/U.S.-COVID-19-Global-Response-and-Recovery-Framework.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Yasmin Sheikhdon, *In Somalia, Innovation is Key to Revolutionizing Health Care*, World Bank Blogs (Dec. 1, 2020), <https://blogs.worldbank.org/youth-transforming-africa/somalia-innovation-key-revolutionizing-health-care>; see also Christine Holst et al., *Sub-Saharan Africa—the New Breeding Ground for Global Digital Health*, *The Lancet* (Apr. 1, 2020), [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/landig/article/PIIS2589-7500\(20\)30027-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/landig/article/PIIS2589-7500(20)30027-3/fulltext).

<sup>22</sup> *Fact Sheet: President Biden's Global COVID-19 Summit: Ending the Pandemic and Building Back Better*, *supra* note 19.

<sup>23</sup> Lucy Cluver, *Covid Has Created a Scale of Family Loss Not Seen Since AIDS*, *the New York Times* (July 20, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/20/opinion/covid-19-orphans.html>.

heart of the African “Silicon Savannah” are youth who are leapfrogging the status quo and developing new solutions to old problems.”<sup>24</sup> The administration should proactively seek out civil society organizations doing groundbreaking, impactful work for their communities in response to the pandemic and provide funding to scale up their efforts.

### **Public Education and Outreach**

Vaccine hesitancy, especially among families with children, is a global phenomenon. In 2019, the WHO declared vaccine hesitancy to be one of the top threats to public health, now fueled by readily available misinformation.<sup>25</sup> Vaccine hesitancy is due to a number of factors, including the novelty of the COVID-19 vaccines, global racism and imperialism, and social and cultural norms.<sup>26</sup> In response to growing vaccine hesitancy and misinformation about COVID-19, the WHO and the United Kingdom launched “Stop the Spread,” a global campaign to counter misinformation about COVID-19.<sup>27</sup> The United States can partner with international organizations and other countries to take up a similar campaign for the COVID-19 vaccine. Any campaign must be culturally grounded and work with trusted messengers to share accurate information about the COVID-19 vaccine and children.

The health and development of children around the world is critical for the well-being and prosperity of the entire next generation. Access to vaccines for all who share this planet is important to ensure that the next generation will survive and prosper after the COVID-19 pandemic. The administration can lead and use its power to ensure equitable distribution of safe and effective vaccines for the world’s adults and children. Thank you for your ongoing work to prioritize children. We look forward to continuing to work with you, and please consider us a resource.

Sincerely,



Bruce Lesley  
President

Cc: U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris  
CDC Director Rochelle Walensky  
Jeff Zients  
Rebecca Levy

---

<sup>24</sup> Yasmin Sheikhdon, *supra* note 21.

<sup>25</sup> *Immunization*, UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/immunization> (accessed Oct. 7, 2021).

<sup>26</sup> Charles Shey Wiysonge, *Vaccine Hesitancy, An Escalating Danger in Africa*, Think Global Health (Dec. 17, 2019), <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/vaccine-hesitancy-escalating-danger-africa>.

<sup>27</sup> *Countering Misinformation About COVID-19: A Joint Campaign with the Government of the United Kingdom*, World Health Organization (May 13, 2020), <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/countering-misinformation-about-covid-19>.