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In December 2011, I was pleased to be among ten officials across the U.S. Government who published in The Lancet a commentary that highlighted the need for a comprehensive strategy to protect vulnerable children around the world. Soon thereafter, we brought together 35 experts and program managers from six Federal agencies and departments to create the "U.S. Government Action Plan on Children in Adversity," which we are proud to release now.

At the U.S. Agency for International Development, we are committed to implementing the programs and policies spelled out in the Action Plan. We recently launched the Center for Excellence on Children in Adversity to draw together our agency's bureaus and missions in partnerships with other federal agencies, civil society groups, the private sector and other governments. Our common goals are to reduce the percentage of children who suffer serious cognitive impairment before age five, to lower the number of children living outside of family care, and to help end violence against children.

There are two competing ways to consider the role of young people in development. Some see a growing youth demographic as a serious problem. They warn of a youth bulge: a large part of the population in developing countries that is apathetic, unproductive, and a drain on economic resources. These young people are considered a volatile, dangerous and purposeless group ready to join the next warlord, drug trafficker, or gang leader able to offer them a siren song of empowerment But there is another, and I believe more valid, way to think about this phenomenon. We should consider young people as individuals seeking their way in life; wanting to be full contributors to a better life for their families, their societies, and world; and are looking for our help in empowering them to fulfill a role for themselves that includes dignity and respect.

When given the opportunities and resources to succeed – education, jobs, healthy lives, and strong support systems – they can be the key to stable democracies, strong societies and faster growing economies. Well-educated, well-nourished youth have proven themselves to be at the forefront of change, innovation, and envisioning new worlds of possibilities.

In helping implement the Action Plan, USAID will commit the human and financial resources needed to make this latter vision of stronger individuals, households, communities and nations a reality. Working together, we can help children not only survive, but thrive.