

## Jedd Medefind, President

### *Christian Alliance for Orphans*

Tomorrow the U.S. Government (USG) will roll out a new Federal “Action Plan on Children in Adversity.” The real value of any new government plan ultimately hinges not on the ideas it carries, but on whether or not those ideas ultimately impact future policies and actions. Even so, the Action Plan itself represents no small accomplishment. Orphan advocates can celebrate this well-thought blueprint for future priorities...while also recognizing that much effort is yet required if its vision is to truly shape the future of U.S. programs.

The Action Plan seeks to establish clear framing principles that will help guide all future USG investments related to orphans and vulnerable children. Its stated goal is succinct and compelling: “*All children will grow up within protective family care and free from deprivation or danger.*” Three Principal Objectives undergird this central goal:

- **Objective 1** *Build strong beginnings:* The U.S. Government will help ensure that children under five not only survive, but also thrive by supporting comprehensive programs that promote sound development of children through the integration of health, nutrition, and family support.
- **Objective 2** *Put family care first:* U.S. Government assistance will support and enable families to care for their children, prevent unnecessary family-child separation, and promote appropriate, protective and permanent family care.
- **Objective 3** *Protect children:* The U.S. Government will facilitate the efforts of national governments and partners to prevent, respond to, and protect children from violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect.

These objectives may seem innocuous. After all, who wouldn't agree? Yet they mark a notable shift from the language and approach that often dominates foreign aid and development programs. Most importantly, alongside a fundamental commitment to evidence-based practices and measurable outcomes, the Action Plan places *family* at the center of the equation. That's not to say that the USG won't continue to engage initiatives that support vulnerable children in ways unrelated to family. But it affirms that a child's need for a family should be a central consideration in every investment the USG makes toward aiding children in adversity.

Of course, government must recognize its limits in this. Government cannot create families or cause families to open their homes to orphans in love. But it can support these goals. First, by ensuring that its well-intended efforts do no harm to families. And then, by supporting family-based care for orphans,

including making a real priority of the preservation of struggling families and adoption when that is not possible. Such government actions can indeed result in more children growing up in families. (For more on the place of family care and alternative forms of cares, see the [CAFO Core Principles](#) and the CAFO white paper "[On Understanding Orphan Statistics](#)").

Will the lofty ideals of the Action Plan find their way into real-world policies and actions? Only time will tell. But the leadership already shown in the Plan's creation bodes well for its implementation. The U.S. Government Special Advisor for Children in Adversity, [Dr. Neil Boothby](#), and his team worked hard both to listen and to lead well throughout the process. They won buy-in from skeptics, dodged quicksand, and pushed forward when bureaucracy bogged down. Much like the job title Dr. Boothby holds, the Action Plan carries little of the arm-twisting authority one often needs to change government-as-usual. Neither does the Action Plan come with large amounts of "new" money; instead, government administrators across dozens of programs must choose to revise their *existing* investments to align with the Plan's vision. That never comes easily, and progress will likely come through piecemeal coalitions-of-the-willing at first.

But the leadership Neil Boothby and his team showed in creating the Action Plan proves they have what it takes to grow a seed of an idea into something significant—even in the slow-to-change environs of government. We have good reason to hope they can do that again.