

**Written Testimony**  
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**Catholic Relief Services**

I would like to begin by thanking Chairman Castro and Ranking member Malliotakis for holding this important hearing today.

My name is Leila Nimatallah. I am a Sr. Policy & Legislative Specialist for Catholic Relief Services, and I am going to share with the committee the 1) way that CRS implements Early Childhood Development programs, 2) why we invested at all levels of the agency in ECD and 3) our recommendations to Congress and the administration going forward.

CRS is the international development and humanitarian arm of the US Catholic Bishops Conference. We work alongside vulnerable populations in 115 countries worldwide to ensure everyone reaches their God-given potential in thriving families and communities, just, peaceful and vibrant societies and flourishing landscapes.

**What is Early Childhood Development (ECD)**

Early childhood is the period of life that begins at conception and extends to eight years of age. The most rapid and critical brain development processes occur from pre-natal development until a child is three years old. The effects of a poor start on a child's well-being are long-lasting and can have profound impacts on all areas of life.

Poor health and nutrition, inadequate learning, and exposure to conflict and displacement impair children's optimal development. Not only do these conditions deprive children of their right to thrive, but children's failure to meet developmental milestones has significant repercussions on a country's economic growth, peace, and prosperity. For example, adults who received suboptimal care during early childhood years will earn 26% less than the average adult income in their country. This lost income traps families in poverty and lowers GDP and tax revenues so countries have less to spend on health and education, creating a vicious cycle.

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 worldwide.

**How CRS Implements ECD**

Healthy food, clean water, health care, protection from abuse and neglect, nurturing care and opportunities for early learning are crucial elements for child brain development, especially during the first 1,000 Days. These are all the elements of Early Childhood Development—which we combine into existing interventions like nutrition and health services to maximize efficiency as programs can make use of the same facilities, transportation, community networks and

distribution systems and because the addition of ECD multiplies the positive impact of these programs. Integrating early childhood development into child, family, community, and governmental programs is an important part of CRS' mission to promote the right of all people to lead full & productive lives, meeting their basic physical needs and living their lives within strong families in an atmosphere of peace, social justice, and human dignity.

To promote ECD, CRS utilizes an existing global structure of partnerships, expertise in disaster relief, capacity building, monitoring and evaluation, and strong programs across sectors including nutrition, sanitation, maternal & child health, child protection, HIV care, and economic strengthening. Within families, interventions include modeling and coaching of hygiene and health practices, breastfeeding and age-appropriate nutrition, psychosocial stimulation, talking and singing to infants and young children, providing opportunities to play, and alternatives to harsh discipline practices. Caregivers receive on-going mentoring as well as monitoring and referral for child development concerns. Positive parenting messages that focus on creating a safe and stimulating environment, building strong bonds, responsive feeding, and age- and stage appropriate learning activities are supplemented with culturally adapted, picture-based materials for parents to learn from, discuss, and keep.

### **Why CRS Invested in ECD at all levels of Agency/Story from the Field**

At his home in Siaya County, Erick Omondi is playing with his children in the compound. At the same time, his wife, Emma Adhiambo, is busy in the kitchen preparing lunch. You can hear the laughter from the children from a distance and smell the sweet aroma from the kitchen as you approach the main house.

"In my community, it is believed that taking care of children should be left to women. In my opinion, this is an outdated belief or culture that we should exit from and embrace a teamwork approach to raising children," said Erick. "When parents team up work, their children grow in an amicable environment," he emphasized.

Erick was not like this a few years back. He often left home early to go for work and came back in the evening when his first son was asleep. "My first child did not have the privilege of being raised like we have done with the twins," Erick said. "When we had him, his mother and I knew nothing about early childhood development, and so we did not pay much attention to his needs as far as nurturing care is concerned," he added. Emma says that the lack of knowledge in Early Childhood Development meant that their first child was not fully attended to as required. "My first child did not get as much attention as needed. We have noticed how clingy he is as compared to his sisters. He always wants attention and is a bit of a slow learner as compared to the twins. I wish we knew better at that time," she said. However, they are quick to point out that they are bridging the gap and using the knowledge they have now acquired through the SCORE ECD project on all their children. SCORE ECD - also known as Strengthening the Capacity of

Religious women in East and Central Africa in ECD - is a project implemented in three countries through the associations of Sisterhood. The countries include Kenya, Malawi, and Zambia. Funded by Conrad N. Hilton Foundation (CNHF) -and implemented through the Catholic Relief Services (CRS). SCORE-ECD works with the community health workforce and Catholic Sisters' Associations to champion and promote the holistic development of children aged 0-2 years, at the household level.

The project equally focuses on children with various vulnerabilities, including disability, and children infected by HIV and AIDS. "I have been talking to people in churches, Chief Barazas, and if an opportunity is granted, I also request to speak during funeral gatherings. I sometimes get calls to go and talk about ECD. With the pandemic, things have changed, so I conduct home visits." Erick said.

Through Community Health Volunteers, caregivers are empowered with skills on early childhood development and instilled with the understanding that parents and caregivers play the most critical role in the overall development of their child or children under their care. The overall goal of the project is for children under the age of two years in Kenya, Malawi, and Zambia attain age-appropriate developmental milestones. We have trained more than 1,900 male champions in Kenya, Malawi and Zambia. They are the ones spearheading the process of bringing other males to take ECD as paramount in their households and in the community, said Sr. Pauline Acayo, Project Coordinator – SCORE ECD.

In the beginning, the male champions would share their experiences, saying how fellow men laugh at them and term them as weak. But now, they say more men are willing to take up the role of championing ECD in their communities. The men are encouraged to support their wives in taking the children for clinic appointments, help with house chores, and be more cognizant of their children's nutrition and wellbeing. "The workload at home has significantly reduced because sometimes when I am washing clothes, their father serves them breakfast or bathing them. Sometimes he takes them for a walk." Emma said. "With his support, I do not feel lonely or overworked" she added. Erick now works at Siaya County as a Male Champion encouraging other men in his village to embrace ECD. This is made possible because of the training he has attained through SCORE ECD.

It is because we know firsthand the way that ECD benefits all members of household and interrupts the cycle of poverty that CRS also partnered with Catholics around the US and others of good faith (and leaders in Congress and other global child advocates who make up what we now call the Thrive Coalition) to educate and raise awareness about the importance of the US government investing in and integrating ECD into our foreign assistance programming. During the previous Congress, it was thanks to leaders like Chairman Castro, (along with Rep Fitzpatrick, House Foreign Affairs Committee Ranking member McCaul, former Chairman

Engel, Senators Blunt and Coons, the Rules Committee, the Armed Services Committees and many other amazing members and staffers who supported the legislation along the way during a very difficult year), that the world's most vulnerable children were prioritized. We thank you and congratulate you for that and appreciate your continued efforts to expand funding for these children and oversee the proper implementation of the Global Child Thrive Act (GCTA).

### **Recommendations**

Since passage of the GCTA in January, my colleagues and I in the Thrive Coalition have been working with the Children in Adversity office to support them as they implement the Advancing Protection and Care for Children in Adversity: A U.S. Government Strategy for International Assistance (2019–2023), or APCCA Strategy, which outlines the U.S. Government's whole-of-government commitment and approach to investing in the development, care, dignity, and safety of the world's most-vulnerable children and their families. APCCA set out the three goals of 1) building strong beginnings (ECD), 2) strengthening families so that they may provide the loving and nurturing care that children need and 3) protecting children from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. We also are working with the administration to do the difficult work of implementing the Global Child Thrive Act, which connects to all three strategy pillars and mandates integrating ECD across the USG foreign assistance infrastructure. Previous to the passage of the GCTA, we found that other administration agencies and offices outside of the Children in Adversity Office, the OVC set aside within PEPFAR and McGovern Dole, invested little in ECD—meaning that the US was not maximizing its foreign assistance or ensuring that children were doing more than surviving past their fifth birthday. We understand it will take a significant amount of work to integrate ECD across sectors and we appreciate the administration's efforts thus far to take on this challenge.

### ***Appointing a Special Advisor for Children in Adversity***

The Thrive Coalition has been thrilled by the partnership with Acting Special Advisor for Children in Adversity, Rebecca Levy and Jamie Gow of her staff, however formalizing leadership in that office with the appointment of a Special Advisor for Children in Adversity would accelerate progress in building support for ECD within all impacted agencies and offices. To that end, we thank Chairman Castro and the other three leads on the Global Child Thrive Act, Representative Fitzpatrick and Senators Blunt and Coons for writing to each impacted agency lead at the beginning of the year. Now that it is July and a Special Advisor for Children in Adversity has yet to be appointed, it would be useful for Congress to continue pressing for that appointment.

### ***Expanding Resources***

Another key component of making the goals of the legislation and APCCA strategy a reality is to expand funding for vulnerable children, not only within the Vulnerable Children line item but also across all sectors that support vulnerable children and their families: Maternal and Child

Health, Nutrition, Early Learning, Protection, Water and Sanitation, HIV and other disease-specific areas, Humanitarian relief, McGovern Dole and more. We thank Chairman Castro and Representative Fitzpatrick for their efforts to do this and thank State Foreign Operations Chair Lee for expanding a number of critical accounts in her mark for FY22. We urge Senate appropriators in this direction as well.

***Global Leadership***

Finally, I wish to stress that the passage of the Global Child Thrive Act is an opportunity to showcase US leadership globally on behalf of vulnerable children and encourage other donors and multilaterals to do the same. Equitable access to COVID vaccinations with a successful strategy to get them in arms is also critical. During the time of COVID as more than 1.5 million children have lost a parent or other caregiver and malnutrition, food insecurity, violence against children and poverty are on the rise, this work is more important than ever.

Thank you again Chairman Castro and Ranking member Malliotakis and committee staff for your vision and leadership: because of your efforts to pass the Global Child Thrive Act and ensure its successful implementation, millions of the world's most vulnerable children will now have a chance to thrive.