

SMART DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE

Why are humanitarian advocates leading on aid reform?

The US government has an unparalleled capacity to deploy humanitarian aid to emergencies and natural disasters. There is also strong support for humanitarian action among US policy makers and the American public.

However, the US humanitarian assistance portfolio is scattered across an out-of-date bureaucracy and lacks a government wide strategy, effective legislation, and adequate resources. Advocates for humanitarian assistance are concerned that the aid reform debate has focused too heavily on development in stable states and too little on emergency interventions for people living in conflict zones or under oppressive regimes.

There are a few concrete areas where the US can improve on its humanitarian efforts as part of the broader aid reform process.

#1. A US government wide strategy

The US is lacking a government wide strategy for its foreign aid. As a result, US aid agencies lack a common consensus and leadership on the purpose of US humanitarian aid. It's also not uncommon for as many as seven different US agencies to be working in the same humanitarian crisis at cross-purposes, or without sufficient coordination.¹

Without a unified government wide strategy, US aid agencies miss crucial opportunities. For example, the US has not invested development dollars in disaster risk reduction before natural disasters strike, a practice that can save countless lives and help disaster-prone communities opt out of the vicious cycle.² Without clearly defined guidance, US aid agencies also have lacked the mandate to consider the transition from relief to development in their planning process from the very beginning of a humanitarian crisis. Prolonged use of relief-oriented strategies is an inefficient use of resources,³ and it does not lead to the long-term recovery and development of the people affected.

With a whole-of-government strategy for aid, US humanitarian aid could mitigate future disasters. When disasters do occur, aid could segue from emergency to transition to development in a way that fully addresses the evolving needs of populations.

¹ Development Assistance Research Associates (DARA), "The Humanitarian Response Index 2009: Whose crisis? Clarifying donor priorities" (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 154.

² "Band aids and beyond: Tackling disasters in Ethiopia 25 years after the famine" (Oxford, UK: Oxfam International, 2009), available at www.oxfam.org/en/policy/band-aids-and-beyond.

³ "Reform priorities in the humanitarian sector," a paper drafted and endorsed by US nongovernmental organizations, including Mercy Corps, World Vision US, Oxfam, Relief International, CARE, International Rescue Committee, etc., and distributed to House Foreign Affairs Chairman Howard L. Berman, ranking member Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, and leaders of the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) and Presidential Study Directive (PSD) on US Global Development Policy, December 2009, 3.



When an earthquake injured her husband and destroyed her home on the shore of Lake Ilopango in El Salvador, Carmen Sosa despaired. Emergency-preparedness training taught Sosa the skills to take charge of her family's safety the next time disaster hits.

Liliana Rodriguez / Oxfam America

#2. Effective legislation

The US needs effective foreign assistance legislation that designates a clear civilian lead on humanitarian policy for the entire government. Humanitarian policy for the US government is currently fragmented across civilian and military agencies, not all of whom are trained to respond in these situations. The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 authorizes the president to name a special coordinator for international disaster assistance, but it does not specify who that coordinator should be.⁴ It has been the custom for presidents to designate this role to the USAID administrator, but without an explicit legal mandate to do so, USAID administrators have lacked the clear mandate to exercise full civilian leadership over this function.

Without civilian leadership of humanitarian response, the US risks that its aid will be implemented without the necessary expertise and knowledge of local context. In 2008, then-President Bush designated the Defense Department as the lead on humanitarian response in Georgia. As a result, humanitarian aid became politicized, response time was slowed, and the aid was rendered less effective. The US military reportedly flew in bottled water, although runoff from the Caucasus Mountains was plentiful in the country. The presence of military forces also sent the wrong message about the humanitarian aid, fueling a perception by Georgians and Russians alike that US aid was instrumentalized for foreign policy purposes.⁵ As a result, it made humanitarian actors vulnerable as targets in a highly charged political context.

The military should be involved in humanitarian operations only where civilian actors lack the necessary “heavy lift” capacity:⁶

“Forced by circumstances, our brave men and women in uniform have stepped up to the task, with field artillerymen and tankers building schools and mentoring city councils—usually in a language they don’t speak. They have done an admirable job. ... But it is no replacement for the real thing—civilian involvement and expertise.” —Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates⁷

#3. Rebuilt structure

The US needs a rebuilt structure to respond nimbly to evolving humanitarian demands. The outdated and complicated agency structure governing humanitarian assistance has made it difficult for the US to adapt to changing needs. One of the most pressing casualties of this system is internally-displaced persons (IDPs). US agencies have drawn an arbitrary distinction between IDPs and refugees. This contributes to much lower levels of assistance to the internally displaced, even though their needs are similar. Meanwhile, there are

⁴ See Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, Sec. 493.597, “Disaster Assistance—Coordination.”

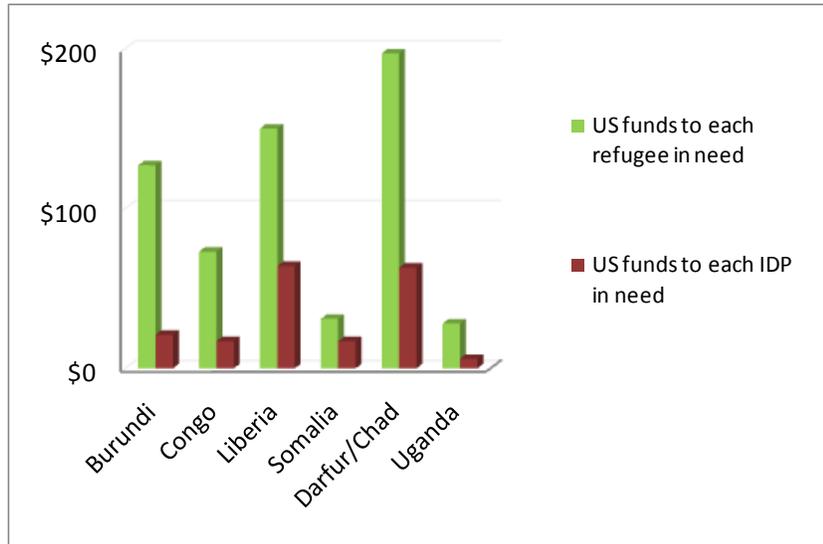
⁵ DARA, “The Humanitarian Response Index 2009: Whose crisis? Clarifying donor priorities” (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 155.

⁶ See “Reform priorities in the humanitarian sector,” a paper drafted and endorsed by US NGOs, including Mercy Corps, World Vision US, Oxfam, Relief International, CARE, International Rescue Committee, etc., and distributed to House Foreign Affairs Chairman Howard L. Berman, ranking member Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, and leaders of the QDDR and PSD on US Global Development Policy, December 2009, 3; and “Smart Development: Why US foreign aid demands major reform” (Boston: Oxfam America, 2008), available at www.oxfamamerica.org/publications/smart-development.

⁷ Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Landon Lecture, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, November 26, 2007.

nearly *twice* as many people worldwide who are suffering from internal displacement as there are refugees. (There were 15 million refugees and 26 million IDPs in 2008.⁸)

Figure 1. IDPs versus refugees: Lives are affected by artificial distinctions



Source: USAID, OFDA, and PRM figures for FY 2006, available at www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/countries/fy2006_index.html.

The distinction contributes to arbitrary gaps in much-needed services: the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) funds education programs for refugees, while the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) does not do the same for IDPs.⁹

In effect, this means that whether a child fleeing conflict gets to go to school or not depends on whether their family has crossed an international border. These distinctions are meaningless for children whose education was disrupted by flooding or an earthquake that forced their families to flee from their communities. The US aid structure must be nimble enough to prevent arbitrary distinctions like this one from getting in the way of helping families get back on their feet.

#4. Resources

The US government needs adequate resources to respond in humanitarian crises in a holistic and sustainable manner. Because the budget process is not designed with the

⁸ UNHCR, "2008 Global trends: Refugees, asylum-seekers, returnees, internally displaced and stateless persons" (Geneva: Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, June 16, 2009), available at www.unhcr.org/4a375c426.html.

⁹ "Reform priorities in the humanitarian sector," a paper drafted and endorsed by US NGOs, including Mercy Corps, World Vision US, Oxfam, Relief International, CARE, International Rescue Committee, etc., and distributed to House Foreign Affairs Chairman Howard L. Berman, ranking member Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, and leaders of the QDDR and PSD on US Global Development Policy, December 2009, 2.

flexibility needed to respond to humanitarian crises, the US government's current humanitarian funding happens through supplemental spending bills. These bills are passed on an ad hoc basis and almost invariably are considerably delayed.

There is always an element of the unknown with natural disasters, but in recent years, supplemental budgets have been used to fund expenses that were predictable and recurring.

The creation of a draw-down account for humanitarian response modeled after the Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA) account would allow for a more effective deployment of resources toward humanitarian crises, because it would increase the predictability of funding throughout the year. The ERMA model could provide the necessary blend of flexibility to adapt to needs on the ground, and accountability to Congress and the American taxpayer.

What can humanitarian advocates do to reform aid?

- ✓ Join our aid reform [community](#) to learn more.
- ✓ Join the [Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network](#).
- ✓ Mobilize your constituents to ask their member of Congress to help make our aid as effective as possible in the fight against humanitarian crises and long-term poverty.

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