

HUMANITARIAN AID AND INTERVENTION:
THE CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATION

Improving the U.S. Government's Humanitarian Response

Anita Menghetti and Jeff Drumtra

The Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) was created in 1964 to provide emergency nonfood humanitarian assistance in response to international crises and disasters, in order to save lives and alleviate human suffering and to reduce the economic impact of those disasters. The office operates under the overall mandate of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which is to provide “economic, development and humanitarian assistance around the world in support of the foreign policy goals of the United States.”¹ OFDA coordinates relief efforts for the U.S. government, and funds relief efforts by UN humanitarian agencies, private nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other international organizations.

In a 1991 amendment to the State Department's Foreign Affairs Manual, OFDA was designated as the lead office for responding to crises involving internally displaced persons. Now the office has extensive experience helping to provide basic shelter, water, sanitation, health care, and even supporting livelihoods to uprooted populations.² There is a growing recognition, however, that physical aid is not enough. Having watched in horror during the 1990s as beneficiaries of relief assistance were subjected to wholesale massacres in Bosnia, physical intimidation and extremist indoctrination in central Africa, ethnic cleansing in

Kosovo, and countless depredations in other places, policy-makers and the humanitarian community increasingly recognize that providing relief items by day to people who are routinely being killed, raped, or terrorized by night is insufficient. “The U.S. government . . . must now place special emphasis on the difficult question of protecting war-affected populations, especially the internally displaced,” a USAID report stated in 2002. “While traditional discomfort lingers in the humanitarian community over mixing human rights with humanitarian assistance programs . . . the problem of the ‘well-fed dead’ must be faced. A necessary part of addressing the broader protection issue will be a far more rigorous and systematic approach to guarding those internally displaced.”³

¹ See USAID, “Frequently Asked Questions”; available at www.usaid.gov/faqs.html#q1.

² OFDA's lead responsibility within the U.S. government for responding to needs of internally displaced persons abroad is cited in the Foreign Affairs Manual, 2 FAM-0, Foreign Disaster Emergency Relief, 2 FAM 066.3 Department of State (TL:GEN-270; April 1, 1991). The Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration also funds humanitarian assistance for internally displaced persons through the International Committee of the Red Cross and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

³ U.S. Agency for International Development, *Foreign Aid in the National Interest: Promoting Freedom, Security, and Opportunity* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, 2002), p. 26.

OFDA is in the early stages of responding to the heightened challenge. An invigorated USAID policy toward internally displaced persons should, at its best, serve to reinforce a commitment agency-wide to assist uprooted persons during all phases of what often become protracted displacements: from the early emergency phase; during the long-term relief maintenance period; through the complicated transition phase of reintegration or relocation; and into long-term development. Better protection of vulnerable populations is often possible with more sophisticated design and implementation of assistance programs as well as more diligent monitoring and reporting on security and human rights problems suffered by vulnerable populations.

This article will focus on current initiatives under way as OFDA and the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA) try to ensure that the U.S. government's humanitarian response to disaster situations in today's world is wise, thorough, accountable, and well coordinated. The initiatives deal with changes inside the institution to facilitate a more integrated response, efforts to achieve a more unified approach among donor nations supporting disaster response programs around the globe, and to strengthen the capacity of organizations involved in humanitarian work.

INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

OFDA is a fairly peculiar entity within the U.S. government and even within USAID. For many years, policy-makers and international development experts considered emergencies to be freakish anomalies that only temporarily interrupted a country's steady march toward long-term economic development. Even highly predictable disas-

ters—such as floods in flood zones—were treated as incidental blips on the planning radar, events that would vanish as rapidly as they materialized. This view of disasters as small aberrations led policy-makers to place OFDA, in its early years, as a stand-alone office within USAID, relatively unconnected to the multibillion-dollar bureaus within USAID in charge of working on the serious issues of long-term development.

The relentless regularity of natural and man-made disasters gradually forced policy-makers to think differently about emergency response and how it fit into the overall goals and development strategies of USAID. Development experts began to realize that disasters often pushed economic and social development backward by years or even decades. USAID formed the Bureau for Humanitarian Response (BHR) in 1992 and placed OFDA inside it, along with the Office of Food for Peace (FFP). The new bureau grew in 1994 with the creation of the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) to address the gaps that existed between the humanitarian relief work performed by OFDA and the development work performed by other USAID bureaus.

USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios determined in 2001 that the agency needed to adopt a more holistic approach to the troubling phenomenon of failing, failed, and recovering states. The Bureau for Humanitarian Response was reorganized to become the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance. In addition to the three offices that addressed these issues under the BHR—OFDA, OTI, and FFP—the new bureau absorbed USAID's Office of Democracy and Governance and established an Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation in 2002 to provide expert technical assistance, training, and analysis in accordance with USAID's mis-

sion to assist countries and societies to manage and mitigate the causes and consequences of violent conflict. Where OFDA previously stood alone, it now finds itself housed in a bureau of specialists able to deal with failing, failed, or recovering states and operating in an environment that emphasizes the value of cross-fertilization and integrated approaches.

OFDA determines that it will spend emergency response resources when the U.S. chief of mission in an affected country has declared a disaster based on three criteria: if the magnitude of the disaster exceeds the affected country's capacity to respond; if the affected country has requested or has indicated willingness to accept U.S. government assistance; and if it is in the interest of the U.S. government to provide assistance.⁴ OFDA also retains the prerogative not to respond to a disaster declaration should it be determined that the needs previously identified have been satisfied via other means. The third criterion, that aid be provided in the interest of the U.S. government, has been questioned by some NGOs as potentially having an intent that exploits human suffering. However, to the authors' knowledge, no individual or agency has provided a substantiated example of where the U.S. government has refused to respond on purely or even primarily political grounds. It also should be noted, in order to gain a better understanding of this criterion, that the traditional litmus test for "being in the interest of the U.S. government" has been that providing aid will demonstrate the generosity and goodwill of the American people toward the victims of the disaster or crisis.

Within this revised framework, OFDA has received clear instructions from the administrator and senior bureau staff to put more effort into working more collaboratively within USAID, with other U.S. gov-

ernment agencies, and within the international humanitarian community to improve coordination and management of humanitarian assistance programs so that the protection and longer-term transition and development needs of displaced persons and other vulnerable groups are anticipated and addressed. USAID's Disaster Assistance Response Teams (DART), which deploy on short notice into disaster situations where it is likely that OFDA will need to determine if additional or new support will be required, provide immediate expertise, and help USAID to identify priority needs and make rapid funding decisions, now include more experts from a broader range of government offices.

One of the newest and most experimental developments within DCHA, which OFDA finds to have significance for its work, is the new entity known as the Humanitarian Protection Team (HPT) housed within the Office of Transition Initiatives. The HPT was created in 2003 to work for the protection of fundamental human rights of civilians in complex humanitarian disasters and armed conflict. The HPT, originally called the Abuse Prevention Team, deployed to the field for the first time in 2003 as part of USAID's Disaster Assistance Response Team in Iraq, where it dealt with issues connected to the discovery of mass graves and potentially violent landownership disputes. An HPT representative deployed with the DART to Liberia in late 2003 and to Darfur, Sudan, in July 2004, to analyze ongoing atrocities and recommend proper program responses. OFDA and the HPT conducted a joint assessment mission to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in early 2004 to investigate sexual and gender-based vio-

⁴ Mitigation or preparedness funds may be expended in a region or country without a disaster declaration.

lence, brief policy-makers in Washington, and identify possible program responses.

BETTER DONORSHIP, STRONGER COORDINATION

As a major donor with expenditures of a quarter billion dollars, OFDA has become acutely aware of its potential and responsibility to influence the large and often unwieldy field of emergency humanitarian assistance. It is a field in which coordination among independent-minded agencies and donors is important but does not come naturally given the fast pace of events and the need for rapid decision-making with lives on the line.

Coordination requires transparency and consultation. OFDA set out to improve the transparency of its own decision-making and priority setting in the mid-1990s by providing clearer and more detailed instructions to NGOs applying to OFDA for funding. In 1996, OFDA wrote guidelines that detailed what it wanted to know about a given proposal in order to judge its merits; the guidelines have been significantly revised three times since then. Prior to 2000, OFDA rarely used competitive mechanisms for the award of grants. Now Annual Program Statements for many country programs clearly detail the sectors OFDA is interested in supporting. OFDA has also invested more effort in better communication with other relief agencies and donors at the headquarters level through increased visits and sharing of plans with other donors and greater participation in the management bodies of the United Nations through both involvement in drafting statements and positions and serving as a member of official delegations to UNICEF and World Food Programme (WFP) executive board meetings. These efforts resulted in some-

what better coordination, although problems continued, some of which were of our own making, such as burdening our partners with too much administrative work. Starting with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Food and Agricultural Organization and eventually adding the WFP and UNICEF, OFDA has gone from awarding multiple grants to one agency in a given country in a given year to having one primary award for each agency into which country or cross-cutting initiatives or programs receive allocations in response to the agency's annual appeal, consolidated appeals, and, still on occasion, specifically written proposals. Furthermore, though OFDA is prohibited from contributing to UN, or any other, trust funds, we have devised means by which we can allocate rapid response funds for the programs we will most likely fund: coordination, emergency agriculture response, logistics, and air operations.

USAID/OFDA's most recent revision to the "Guidelines for Proposals and Reporting," in July 2004, make clear that agencies applying for OFDA funding should adhere to principles of developmental relief.⁵ In the interpretation that OFDA applies, developmental relief is more about the sensitivity with which humanitarian assistance is provided—in our view, it is necessary that humanitarians think about the impact their aid will have on development. Even if their final analysis is that in the particular circumstances relief aid will have some negative implications, yet they judge that it is still

⁵ Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, "Guidelines for Proposals and Reporting," pp. 11, 12, 64, and 65; available at www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/resources/pdf/guidelines_2004.pdf.

necessary to act, being aware of the potential negative effects will help them to pay more attention to the details of their aid strategy in the particular case, thus making humanitarian aid more effective overall. The underlying premise of USAID/OFDA's principles of developmental relief—collaboration and coordination, context specificity, promoting livelihoods, addressing the needs of the most vulnerable, prevention, mitigation and preparedness, utilization of international standards, protection, systematic information collection, capacity building, and utilization of local capacity—is that the humanitarian community has too many failures and successes in its history not to learn from and apply the resulting lessons. While OFDA is aware of and accommodates the fact that many organizations have no way to know everything about a specific location when they first arrive, in reality much of our funding goes to the same NGOs, in the same countries, year after year. What may be considered an acceptable level of context specificity and uncertainty regarding future impact of aid in the crush of a rapidly unfolding emergency should surely not be acceptable even six months later. OFDA does emphasize the importance of development goals in principle but not at the cost of the emergency needs to save lives immediately. Given this, the “back to basics” discussions that have become prominent recently appear to be a rejection of why we have come to demand more from ourselves to begin with—that is, because the basics were not sufficient.

OFDA and other donor agencies acknowledged in 2003 that the time had come for donor nations to practice what they preach by putting greater effort into coordinating and standardizing their own activities to prevent duplicative efforts and ferret out competing priorities. Thus was born the Good

Humanitarian Donorship Initiative, which seeks to hold donors such as OFDA more accountable to all of their stakeholders—affected populations, taxpayers, and other donors—for their policies and decisions. OFDA welcomes the challenge to improve its coordination with other donor agencies.

The Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative, which involves most of the world's major donor governments, commits OFDA and other donors to observe many of the same standards of performance and accountability that donors expect of their funding partners—for example, the use of objective criteria for demonstrating need, coordination, and results. The initiative is pushing to standardize the reporting requirements imposed by donors on relief agencies and will try to improve the tracking of financial flows by making donors' financial reporting on humanitarian expenditures more uniform. OFDA is particularly eager to capitalize on the initiative in order to encourage improved needs assessments that will more reliably depict the true humanitarian needs in disaster situations and point to proper funding priorities. Better and more dependable needs assessments could have a major impact on how OFDA chooses to disburse its funds.

The Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative is regarded by some as a watershed effort that will instill the highest principles and performance standards to the donors charged with disbursing billions of dollars of assistance. Others have more skeptically asked if the initiative is simply a well-intentioned but ultimately difficult-to-implement and hence fruitless effort.⁶ How-

⁶ For a solid overview of the initiative, see Joanna Macrae and Adele Harmer, “Good Humanitarian Donorship: A Mouse or a Lion?” *Humanitarian Exchange* 24, July 2003, p. 10.

ever, it must be understood that donors need to invest in humanitarian assistance efforts for the long run; this necessitates a slow and careful review of how implementing the principles bumps up against a myriad of existing national policies, practices, and laws that will have to be addressed if lasting and significant improvements are to be realized. OFDA and the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance see the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative as a welcome challenge. OFDA is participating fully in the young process and is committed to giving it every opportunity to succeed. USAID has specifically taken on responsibility for cosponsoring, with Belgium's government, a pilot Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2005. During the last week of July, representatives from OFDA, Office of Food for Peace, and the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration at the State Department as well as USAID's representative in Geneva attended preparatory meetings in Kinshasa along with the Belgian cochair and other donors, UN agencies, and NGOs.

STRENGTHENING HUMANITARIAN CAPACITY

Because much disaster response work is reactive in nature, OFDA has pushed itself and its partners in recent years to take proactive steps to plan, coordinate, and improve expertise where possible. As of August 2004, OFDA has provided more than \$38.6 million to OCHA since 2000 to ensure that it mobilizes and coordinates humanitarian action worldwide within the family of often fractious and turf-conscious UN agencies. OFDA has been a leader in furthering the development of shared services within the UN system in

order to systematize and structure the humanitarian response and increase accountability and performance. OFDA has been most closely associated with promoting the use of Humanitarian Information Centres, Joint Logistics Centres, and the UN Humanitarian Air Services.

Many disasters can be anticipated and their effects can be mitigated. Therefore OFDA generally utilizes 10 percent of its annual budget for mitigation, planning, and preparedness activities. More than twenty years ago OFDA began to offer courses for national and regional government officials who had responsibility for disaster management. This training, greatly refined, is especially well respected in Latin America and the Caribbean, where it has now been brought into universities and training centers throughout the region. OFDA has also supported the Asia Disaster Preparedness Center's regional efforts and is currently looking into how these experiences could be appropriately applied in Africa.

In addition, OFDA provides financial support to cross-cutting projects that address issues of performance, security, and technical capacity in relief work. Recipients of OFDA funding for these cross-cutting activities include the Sphere Project, which is attempting to improve the quality and accountability of humanitarian assistance by setting core minimum standards; the Active Learning Network on Accountability and Performance, which works to identify common problems and consensus solutions among relief agencies; the Humanitarian Policy Group, a program of the Overseas Development Institute, which provides research, evaluation, and advice on humanitarian assistance practices; and InterAction, an alliance of more than 160 international humanitarian organizations based in the United States.

OFDA also recognizes that there are specific, community-wide needs such as better security-related practices and improved emergency health management. OFDA therefore supports Red R, an organization that recruits aid workers for other humanitarian agencies and provides them with technical support and a wide range of security training and other technical training. OFDA

also supports a Columbia University program offering advanced training to emergency public health managers.

The goal common to all these projects and initiatives is to encourage and support efforts that improve disaster response by making the people who do it and the people who fund it more skilled, better coordinated, better informed, and more accountable.