



Improving the Effectiveness of Humanitarian and Transition Programs Summary of Proceedings

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The workshop on "Improving the Effectiveness of Humanitarian and Transition Programs" was held at the request of an interagency core group—Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and National Security Council—that is presently reviewing the United States' civilian humanitarian emergency programs, at the instruction of Secretary of State Albright. The core group has at several points reached out to major policy and research institutions to assist in informing the review. The ODC workshop concentrated on the linkage of relief, transition, and sustainable development programs and the implications, from a congressional perspective, of the possible consolidation of the U.S. government's humanitarian and post-conflict transition programs. There are other related issues that are not being addressed in this evaluation, such as the declining funding levels for sustainable development programs, the inadequacy or absence of crisis prevention mechanisms, and the authority of the Treasury Department over multilateral financial assistance. Even so, the study may lead to some improvement in the performance of U.S. agencies.

Opening Remarks from Morton H. Halperin (Director of the Policy Planning Staff at the Department of State) and Jim Michel (Counselor, USAID)

Morton Halperin emphasized the profoundly changed nature of humanitarian crises—their increased number, high intensity, and grave new challenges (internally displaced, security risks, resort to atrocities)—and their ever higher prominence in foreign policy. The humanitarian stakes for U.S. national interests are today far greater than they were ten years ago. We need to take account of how humanitarian crises have changed and create more robust and unified humanitarian leadership if we are to be more effective and advance U.S. interests. There is today a pressing need for an effective empowered humanitarian advocate at the highest policy-making levels and a better means of coordinating humanitarian programs across agencies.

In the short-term, discrete measures can improve coordination without altering existing institutional arrangements. The review will examine and develop these options. The review will also examine intermediate steps that realign responsibilities and institutional arrangements but fall short of merger: for example, re-designation of authorities, new coordination mechanisms, and select co-location. The review will also develop three consolidation options: within USAID, State, and a freestanding emergency agency that reports to the Secretary of State or the President.

The State Department has repeatedly stressed that there are no preconceived conclusions to the review. The review provides USAID, as well as the other major participants, with an opportunity to express their views on how best to increase the profile and empowerment of the humanitarian agenda.

Jim Michel commented that he shares the concern about U.S. response to humanitarian crises and post-conflict transitions. Although coordination is obviously necessary, he believes that a clear distinction needs to be maintained between implementing humanitarian assistance programs on the one hand, and dealing with the complex political dimensions of crisis management on the other. In the view of USAID, humanitarian assistance needs to be seen as one distinct element that fits into the overarching political commitment to deal with crisis or transition in a given country. It is critical that humanitarian policy and responses mesh with development policy and programs, as well as diplomatic concerns. In virtually every other donor government, their development agency has responsibility for humanitarian assistance, reflecting the necessity of policy coherence between emergency and longer term

development objectives.

Emergency Relief and Development

There was an evident consensus that the concept of a "continuum" linking emergency relief to long-term development may be too simplistic to be helpful. Far more important is the need to develop effective coordination and interaction of programs in these different areas for countries emerging from crises.

USAID has learned a great deal in recent years about how to respond in an effective and flexible way, even while keeping within its own "Strategic Objectives" and the funding earmarks set by Congress. In Rwanda and other countries, the Office of Transition Initiatives was a lead element in USAID's creative approach. OTI has provided a model for other donor countries to look to when trying to stabilize post-conflict situations and create a foundation for development by reaching out to civil society. In addition, the direct and extensive investment by senior level USAID officials in the Rwanda program was another highly important factor in its success.

In Rwanda, reporting and other bureaucratic procedures were streamlined in an effort to "do business differently" and change behavior. When the situation shifted on the ground, USAID was able to move people and resources quickly. Mission staff recognized ahead of time that circumstances would likely change and built in "crisis modifiers" to increase flexibility.

USAID personnel made a conscious effort to build development aspects into relief programs from their inception in Rwanda. For example, the emergency relief projects of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance and the Food For Peace program became progressively more development-oriented. The "seeds and tools" program has helped return agricultural production to pre-war levels. This type of programmatic integration was only possible because "all the buttons" were at USAID's disposal.

According to USAID speakers, the major "lessons learned" from USAID's Rwanda experience were that the following factors are important in any complex humanitarian emergency or transition program:

- Staff continuity which strengthens the link between relief, transition and development
- Built-in flexibility
- Strategic planning process
- Willingness of the mission to take risks and act flexibly

According to a State Department official, the fact that Rwanda became a high priority following the mishandling of the 1994 genocide by the U.S. government and others was integral to USAID's ability to perform well. The programs were successful in part because they were closely aligned with U.S. foreign policy goals and therefore had policy-level backing from the State Department and the National Security Council.

Operational and Policy Coordination

There is ambivalence and tension within USAID regarding the linking of crisis and transition programs to political considerations. On the one hand, it is very clear that fundamentally political challenges—security concerns, ethnic conflicts, gross human rights violations—figure prominently in today's crises and must be acknowledged and factored into program decisions. Referring to the Bosnia experience, one former USAID official remarked that it is clear USAID's programs cannot work effectively in a political vacuum. On the other hand, this participant acknowledged that USAID officials customarily fear having their programs subordinated to political considerations or calculations that distort the programs' objectives.

Participants argued that institutional reorganization alone may not guarantee effective humanitarian leadership. Effective coordination mechanisms can bring substantial results. However, operational coordination may be more easily upgraded than strengthening senior level policy coordination on humanitarian crises. Simply inviting the correct individuals to the key meetings can significantly advance the humanitarian agenda. USAID has often been left out of the policy-making process in the past. As a former USAID official noted, USAID was

not present at the negotiation of the Dayton accords on Bosnia because: 1) the State Department negotiators focused on the need for significant resources from international financial institutions and engaged instead with the Treasury Department; and 2) the rehabilitation effort was to be led by Europeans. On both counts, USAID was considered of marginal importance. There are clearly more fundamental issues preventing coordination, such as the culture and history of interaction between the two organizations.

Several participants also emphasized that beyond the issue of enhanced coordination and/or consolidation of USAID and State Department humanitarian programs, there are also vital challenges in ensuring effective coordination with the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Council, international organizations, other donors, and nongovernmental actors.

Corporate Culture

Many participants argued that differences of organizational culture between the State Department and USAID may be as important, if not more so, than organizational structure in influencing the effectiveness of humanitarian programs. The State Department gives highest priority to responding to short-term political crises. Similarly, in USAID, highest priority is given to sustainable development interests. There is ignorance on both sides about the operational constraints that influence the actions of individuals or organizations.

A former USAID official commented that the State Department tends to view USAID as a problem to be minimized rather than part of the solution to be promoted. This treatment often places USAID officials and staff on the defensive.

U.S. Foreign Policy Goals

Participants argued that quite aside from the issue of enhanced coordination/consolidation of USAID and State, there is a pressing need for consistency in U.S. policy toward humanitarian intervention. At present, that consistency is lacking and often confuses or compromises our humanitarian field operations and U.S. humanitarian interests. Most critical in this regard is U.S. policy toward the use of force and ensuring quick and timely decision-making, as well as ensuring that senior policymakers are adequately informed of conditions on the ground.

Several participants commented that the absence of a coherent policy lessens the usefulness of any increased coordination or integration of USAID and State Department humanitarian programs. As one participant put it, "We are trying to come up with good answers to bad questions." According to State department officials, the increased coordination or integration of USAID and State Department humanitarian programs will create stronger and more unified humanitarian leadership—precisely what is required to fill this policy gap.

Congressional Perspectives

Disaster and refugee accounts are among the most popular foreign assistance programs in Congress. In 1996, for example, development assistance funding was cut by 25 percent from the previous year, while refugee accounts were fully-funded and disaster assistance funding levels rose.

Congressional staff stressed that caution is needed when raising reorganization plans with members of Congress, some of whom are still bruised from the last fight over foreign affairs reorganization or are uneasy with programs that involve funding USAID activities with political overtones, such as democracy promotion, demobilization, or improvement of civil-military relations. If approached clumsily, overtures to the Hill on reorganization issues could actually backfire and damage prospects for improving the effectiveness of humanitarian response.

A former congressional staff member emphasized that the political constraints and short time-frame of congressional members and their staff should be taken into account by the State Department and USAID during any effort to pass reorganization legislation. As one

speaker pointed out, complex messages about the integration of programs are not easily absorbed given these constraints. For example, for much of the 1990s, USAID has been trying to convince Congress of the need for integrated sustainable development programs. Despite their efforts, certain programs with direct, measurable impact, such as child survival, continue to receive much higher priority than other programs.

In the opinion of one speaker on congressional perspectives, the reorganization or coordination of State Department and USAID humanitarian and countries-in-transition programs to better respond to crises is not perceived as an urgent issue on Capitol Hill. Speakers stressed that there is absolutely no interest in creating a new, or revising the old, Foreign Assistance Act of 1961. Interest is more likely to be attracted with narrowly focused Foreign Assistance Act provision updates. Unless there is an argument for a tremendous efficiency gain from formal reorganization, support will not be forthcoming.

A State Department official emphasized that while Congress may not be focused on reorganization per se, there has been extensive and impassioned debate on U.S. response to critical crises in Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo, and elsewhere. How we manage our humanitarian agenda, and how effectively we do so, are issues that are front and center in Congress now and into the next administration. Second, it is clear that there is little active interest within Congress in coordinating or unifying U.S. humanitarian programs. That means, in effect, that it will be incumbent upon this Administration and the Administration that follows to take the lead in engaging Congress. The current review of U.S. humanitarian programs is consciously intended to inform any action in this regard.

Comments on the Review Process

An NGO representative said that the problems with the current system have not been well defined, as was discussed in a previous workshop. In addition, the steps and timing of the review process have not been made clear, hampering NGO ability to participate effectively. A State Department official responded that there have in fact been several NGO sessions with more scheduled for the future.

A senior USAID official added that throughout the review process, there has been a suspicion within the NGO community that the review is biased in favor of consolidation within the State Department. In his opinion, based on extensive discussions with the State Department, this is simply not true. Indeed, the review offers an open opportunity for USAID to make a compelling case for consolidation within USAID as a true international emergency and sustainable development agency. NGOs should recognize this opening and take full advantage of it, rather than reject the review.

Concluding Observations

There seems to be a consensus that the political context of humanitarian crises is a reality that needs to be taken into account, but a consensus is lacking over exactly how and to what degree this should be addressed.

- Although we do need a stronger voice for the "humanitarian agenda," we may also need to include the "development agenda" in foreign policy. For example, if humanitarian and transitional programs are going to take up the bulk of foreign assistance funds, what are the implications for long-term development efforts and how can they be effectively confronted?
- USAID has learned a great deal about how to incorporate long-term development objectives into emergency relief programs.
- Operational coordination is not as much a problem as coordination at the higher levels of policy making.
- The creation of a new structure or coordinating mechanism has to anticipate and deal with cultural differences between USAID and the State Department to the extent possible.

- Any future engagement with Congress on reorganization of humanitarian programs will need to be handled carefully. If mishandled, it could negatively impact humanitarian programs.
- There is a need for more robust, unified policy leadership as well as operational coordination. How precisely one achieves these goals is far less certain. Between simple enhanced coordination measures and full consolidation lies a third option, intermediate steps that fall short of merger but which might integrate the policy staff of USAID and State, under a senior official to whom the Secretary of State could turn for both policy advice and coordination of operational programs. The joint staff could also include human rights and other relevant expertise.

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