

USAID/OFDA After Action Excerpts related to Interagency Coordination FY 2006 – FY 2009

The following information comes directly from existing OFDA After Action Reviews and does not include any analysis about the statements or recommendations. After Action documents excerpted here include: the Lebanon complex emergency, Cyclone Sidr response in Bangladesh, and Cyclone Nargis response in Burma.

LEBANON HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE 2007

Coordination between USAID and the Department of State

Primary Issues

Staff at USAID/OFDA and the Department of State (State) have different systems and procedures for managing large-scale emergencies. These differences are not well understood by staff. During the Lebanon response, this resulted in some confusion and frustration regarding the flow of information within and between agencies, decision-making mechanisms, and the roles of the various participating offices, including: USAID/OFDA, State, Office of the Director of U.S. Foreign Assistance (F), State, Office of the Secretary, Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS), State, Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), State, Executive Secretariat, Operations Center, Task Force (STF), and State, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Bureau of International Organization Affairs (IO).

Causes and Implications

1. During the Lebanon response, both USAID/OFDA and the Department of Defense (DoD) posted liaisons at the STF. These staffers were frustrated by the high turnover rate of State Department staff on the STF, who typically serve only one shift of four to eight hours. They had to brief incoming STF members daily, and new recruits rotated off the team before becoming familiar with their role and the issues at hand. The constant change in team members lessened the effectiveness and productivity of the STF and coordination efforts with USAID/OFDA and DoD, as discussions and decisions were often revisited on a daily basis. Further, a key State mission was the evacuation of American citizens from Lebanon. The RMT was not clear about the relative priority of the humanitarian response and the visibility of these issues for STF staff.
2. PRM appreciated USAID/OFDA's obvious commitment to ensuring PRM's involvement on the DART. However, PRM felt that the process for participant selection was unclear. At times, PRM staff members seconded to the DART maintained their PRM identity rather than filling a functional role on the DART. This created some confusion about roles, responsibilities and chain of command. Because the size of the DART was limited, there was concern that the deployment of non-functional team members would diminish the DART's effectiveness and ability

to conduct core functions, and created parallel channels to the Embassy and implementing partners. Further, some PRM staff members who participated in the DART had not completed requisite DART/RMT training prior to deployment. The resulting gaps in knowledge led to some communication breakdowns, breaks in the chain of command, and other systems problems.

3. The RMT and PRM both developed information products such as sitreps. PRM's sitrep was initially an internal product, but was later distributed externally. Information in the different sitreps was sometimes contradictory, and proved confusing to many members of the interagency community.

Recommendations

1. PRM and USAID/OFDA should initiate discussions with the STF manager regarding mechanisms for effectively managing humanitarian assistance issues within the TF.
2. During "peace time," USAID/OFDA should work with State and USAID geographic bureaus to clarify humanitarian response roles, responsibilities and systems, and then educate our interagency and implementing partners.
3. PRM and USAID/OFDA should come to agreement on the format and content of information products and evaluate options for coordinated and/or consolidated reporting.
4. USAID/OFDA staff should receive training about STF structure and systems.

DOD Coordination

Primary Issue

USAID/DCHA/USAID/OFDA greatly valued DOD's support of field operations in Lebanon. Indeed, the USAID/OFDA Operations Liaison Unit (OLU) officer deployed with the Joint Task Force (JTF) in the field facilitated highly successful coordination between the DART and DOD. However, coordinating with DoD in Washington, DC was complex, and nodes for operational decision-making were sometimes unclear.

Causes and Implications

1. DoD's primary mission in Lebanon was the Noncombatant Evacuation Operation (NEO), and humanitarian assistance was a minor component of DoD's overall mission. As a result, DoD was not initially able to fill USAID/OFDA's request for a Military Liaison Officer (MLO) to serve on the RMT.
2. Most of USAID/OFDA's Operations Liaison Unit (OLU) staff were deployed as MLOs in the field, so the RMT was not able to use the OLU's expertise to facilitate communications with the DoD. In the absence of an MLO, RMT members had difficulties identifying the appropriate offices and contacts within DoD to coordinate humanitarian relief operations.

3. DoD assisted USAID/OFDA by shipping humanitarian relief commodities on a "space available" bases on ships used for the NEO. DoD, the STF, and USAID/OFDA conducted daily video teleconference meetings to coordinate these operations. DoD and USAID/OFDA representatives were often frustrated by the high turnover rate of personnel on the STF, which at times delayed decision making regarding operations or required decisions to be revisited in the daily meetings.

Recommendations

1. Building on OLU's existing systems and relationships, USAID/OFDA should work with DoD to codify protocols for working together during response operations. The protocols should be included in the RMT Planning Procedures, including points of contact and the process for deploying Liaison Officers at both the OSD/Combatant Command level and in the field.
2. If the DoD is unable to deploy an MLO, a member of the OLU staff should fill the position, and be physically located with the RMT in the Operations Center.
3. USAID/OFDA should develop a template for a high-level statement describing requisite military support that USAID/OFDA could issue in the early stages of future responses. Based on such a statement, USAID/OFDA would be well positioned to seek written confirmation from DoD that describes the limits, scope, or parameters of DoD interaction in a specific humanitarian response.

BANGLADESH 2007

Primary Issues

OFDA Mandate and Role in Bangladesh: Through a review of survey responses, interviews with individuals involved in the response, and a DART work group session, a major issue that emerged concerned a lack of understanding and consistency among the Embassy, USAID Mission, and OFDA staff over the mandate and role of OFDA in the field in a disaster response.

Priority Recommendations:

1. In order to be successful in its outreach to other parts of USAID about the mandate, roles, and capabilities of OFDA, the office should put more money and resources into training/orientations as well as ongoing communications, to include field visits to disaster prone regions/countries. This recommendation includes a review of the current outreach approach as well as an evaluation of the effectiveness of the training. The goal should be strong working relationships with USAID Missions built on trust and an enhanced understanding of OFDA's mandate, roles, and capabilities.

2. The OFDA Director or Response Director should conduct an introductory telephone briefing with the Ambassador and/or Mission Director about OFDA's role and mandate when it deploys field personnel in response to a major disaster.

Other Recommendations:

- OFDA should be prepared to provide Missions with input and assistance with country strategic plans and annual operations plans with a view towards humanitarian assistance issues.
- OFDA's After Action Review report should be disseminated internally and shared with the USAID Mission and Embassy in Bangladesh.
- As OFDA drafts country strategies, it should include an assessment of Mission and Embassy familiarity with OFDA to help formulate needs for relationship building and training.
- OFDA should educate internal and external audiences about the functions of a DART.
- OFDA should play a more active role in Backstop 76, Crisis and Recovery Officer, training.

Managing the Mission's Expectations: Press, Reporting, and Transition: Survey results showed that coordination with the USAID Mission proved challenging at times, particularly in the early days of the response. The Mission seemed unfamiliar with the role of an assessment team/DART and the function of each person. It should also be noted that USAID/Bangladesh and the U.S. Embassy were not familiar with OFDA's information reporting mechanisms. The USAID Mission and Embassy consistently requested that non-humanitarian reporting be woven into OFDA cables, such as U.S. foreign policy objectives and the large-scale macroeconomic impact of the cyclone. Mission staff expected OFDA cables to be more comprehensive and include development and political language, as well as reporting on the military's activities even though the Humanitarian Assistance Survey Team wrote its own cables.

OFDA missed many important press events since it did not have a Press Officer on the DART. OFDA was only in the background for significant events like Administrator Fore's visit. Finally, input related to transition was mixed, although many commented that OFDA was very proactive.

Priority Recommendations:

1. Per existing practice, a delegation of authority should be developed in Washington each time that a field team is deployed (assessment or DART) which describes the team's mandate, purpose, composition, and position descriptions. It should also include information on the type of reporting that the team will

produce. The delegation must be shared with post via cable to establish realistic expectations in the field. This cable should also be shared with all OFDA staff.

2. In a major disaster, a Press Officer should be deployed.

Other Recommendations:

- A transition plan is not the same as a demobilization plan and it is important for DART leadership to engage the Mission Director early in the response about transition planning. A transition plan should include triggers, based on needs of beneficiaries, on when the Mission takes the lead for transition planning from OFDA. OFDA should share transition plan guidance office-wide so that it can be institutionalized in OFDA's response framework.
- The DART should continue to develop sector strategies during the response. These strategies feed into the transition plan and can also assist the Mission with its long term recovery plan.
- The transition plan helps OFDA build a long-term, positive relationship with the Mission and can be used as an advocacy tool with the Office of Management and Budget and Congress.

Coordination with the Department of Defense (DOD): OFDA's relationship with certain elements within DOD is not having the desired affect. An example is when DOD, without OFDA request or approval, begins a relief action, promotes the effort in the media, and then asks OFDA to fund the activity. However, the overall impression was that the working relationship between OFDA and DOD was quite good during this response. OFDA's engagement strategy with the military paid off on this response because DOD understood its supporting role to the lead agency, OFDA. Although DOD understood OFDA's lead role, the embassy did not. This led to additional confusion of lead versus supporting roles. DOD and the embassy used this response as an opportunity to enhance bi-lateral relationships with the Bangladesh Government. Most participants believed that DOD's response was larger than required for the magnitude of this disaster, perhaps to achieve civil-military objectives beyond humanitarian assistance.

Priority Recommendations:

1. OFDA needs standard procedures for requesting DOD assistance. These procedures should be incorporated into future staff training.
2. OFDA should develop terms of reference or a letter of introduction to Combatant Commands (COCOMs) and Joint Task Forces for all deployed Military Liaison Officers (MLOs). The letter should be signed by the OFDA Director or Response Director.

Other Recommendations:

- OFDA needs to review its engagement strategy with DOD to ensure that it is working with the most relevant offices/organizations within DOD. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to shape DOD's humanitarian assistance/disaster relief actions and behaviors.
- OFDA should develop a course that educates OFDA staff on roles, responsibilities, and capabilities of DOD and working relationships during a disaster response.

BURMA 2008

Coordination with DOD and the Interagency

Issue Statement

Coordination with DOD and the Interagency was problematic at several levels, and especially at the tactical level with DOD. There were coordination problems between the JTF and DART related to the appropriateness, timing, procurement, and distribution of certain relief commodities, such as bottled water and plastic sheeting. At the PACOM and Pentagon levels there was better overall coordination, but this had a limited impact on the coordination problems in the field. USAID/OFDA also had coordination issues with the US Mission in Rangoon, State, and NSC in Washington.

Discussion and Impacts

- The U.S. Government did not share a "whole of government" response strategy in Burma. In Washington, strategic guidance from interagency partners such as the National Security Council (NSC) generally was not based on humanitarian principles. In Rangoon, State Department personnel deferred to the Defense Attaché, who advanced DOD's primary interest in "access and engagement" with the GOB.
- USAID/OFDA's humanitarian "message" was not getting out. DOD transcribed and distributed notes from the PCC on classified systems, limiting USAID/OFDA access and ability to influence content. Because the DART Leader did not participate in the PCC, the field team was not aware of the context of DOD and State Department decisions.
- OFDA's pro-active response to *push* offers reinforces the "Push System."

Priority Recommendations: Coordination with DOD and the Interagency

- Generate procedures for developing a USAID/OFDA mission statement for USG disaster responses, to be approved and disseminated by the U.S. Ambassador in the affected country.

- Develop an *overall outreach strategy* to raise USAID/OFDA's visibility and get information out to key decision makers in the Interagency, Congress, and partners on USAID/OFDA's mandate, mission, and role as the Lead Federal Agency (LFA) for foreign disaster response. These engagements should also include discussions of humanitarian mandates and principles. Examples include:
 - Consider strengthening USAID/OFDA's presence in the *interagency calls (SVTC and/or PCC)* and other key venues to ensure USAID/OFDA's message/mandate are understood and well articulated.
 - Consider preparing a best practices briefing book which could be provided to Ambassadors, Mission Directors, general officers, and VIPs.
- As part of this overall strategy, OFDA should prepare generic best practices "one-pagers" that explain key issues in any disaster response such as:
 - The appropriateness of bottled water versus water treatment systems;
 - When and how stockpile items are used and why;
 - Why certain items should NOT be distributed, such as baby formula and candy.
 - These one-pagers should be:
 - Distributed to appropriate people *before* disasters occur.
 - Available for quick distribution when a disaster strikes to individuals and groups unaware of disaster response best practices.
 - Used in DOD guidance documents to drive best practices during DOD disaster response planning efforts.
- The overall strategy should also include:
 - Preparing cables with information on disaster response best practices that could be sent to embassies, especially those in disaster-prone countries.
 - Placing these best *and worst* practices on OFDA's website
 - Educating decision makers on the positive aspects of the "Pull System" versus the inappropriateness of the "Push System."
- As OFDA interfaces more and more with DOD it should:
 - Develop an appropriate course for senior military leaders to educate them on best practices ;
 - Take into consideration DOD's desire to "do something" when a disaster occurs.
- Several years ago OFDA worked on a draft for a "Federal Foreign Response Plan." Consider reviving that effort as an *International Response Framework*, to capture the ideas presented in the above recommendations. This framework could be similar to the *National Response Framework*.
- Validate and/or develop pre-loaded templates on USAID/OFDA's website or in the RMT files of the following tools and templates:
 - Delegation of Authority for the DART;
 - OFDA mission statements for the disasters with a place or method for endorsement by the US Ambassador of the affected country;

- Terms of Reference for the DART;
 - MOUs if available/appropriate;
 - A comprehensive cable template that includes guidance on best practices for the type of disaster that has occurred that could be sent within a day of the disaster declaration.
-
- Consider discussions with appropriate leadership on the potential for changing the Foreign Assistance Act to clarify and emphasize USAID/OFDA's authorities, mandate, and mission.