



MODERNIZING HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

November 2020

INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE COMMITTEE

Introduction

U.S. humanitarian leadership under a future Administration will face a challenging environment. The current tools and approaches for responding to humanitarian crises are not fit for purpose. The average length of conflicts today last more than [20 years](#), yet the funding to respond to these crises is typically provided in one year grants. The sector largely measures its success based on activities and outputs—such as the number of children enrolled in school—instead of outcomes—like actual improvements in learning.

Instead of embracing and advancing the aid reform agenda, for the past four years, U.S. humanitarian diplomacy and leadership has been at best missing and at worst destructive. During this time, the humanitarian system has grown only more overstretched; international aid has plateaued while needs in low- and middle-income countries continue to rise. Total global humanitarian assistance [declined](#) between 2018 and 2019, while Humanitarian Response Plans continued to be [underfunded](#) by nearly 40 percent. This gap between financing and requirements is only widening due to COVID-19. [Estimates](#) suggest more than 500 million more people will be pushed into poverty while the number of people suffering from extreme hunger is set to nearly double by the end of 2020. Meanwhile, a racial reckoning in the U.S. has inspired and elevated discourse around de-colonizing aid and shown a light on the limited progress of the localization agenda.

USAID has just emerged from a significant and drawn-out reorganization, forming the new Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance, while PRM has been decimated.

A future Administration should avoid a wholesale restructure of U.S. humanitarian assistance and instead focus on improvements to U.S. policy and practice that will have an outsized impact for the people most in need. Critically, the U.S. government should take-up an agenda for improving localization and inclusion of vulnerable populations; leverage U.S. leadership and funding to the United Nations to encourage reforms that will make the humanitarian aid system more effective and efficient; and embrace an aid reform agenda.

1. Drive towards increased localization and inclusion.

National and local actors are often the first responders in a crisis, and they are the actors who will remain to help rebuild after an acute crisis subsides. For key populations, like women and girls, identify and serve those most in need. Despite their expertise in the local culture and context, these local institutions are more often overlooked by international donors, who prefer to work with technical expertise. But this comes at the expense of—and entrenches—imbalanced power dynamics as well as creates a risk of a potential mismatch between solutions and needs. COVID-19 has only underscored the need for greater localization. The pandemic has exposed the fragility of the traditional model and the centrality of local actors who not only understood nuanced community needs in this crisis, but importantly who stepped in to respond to those needs when international and domestic travel was halted.

Making the localization agenda a reality and supporting the decolonization of foreign aid should achieve this, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migrants (PRM) should center their response to forced displacement on four key actions. First, support and fund the meaningful integration of displaced people into host communities, such as through their inclusion in national laws that enable freedom of movement, access to education and health care, and access to the formal labor market. Second, strengthen national systems, through technical assistance and financing, to ensure that public institutions have the capacity to provide quality services to displaced populations and that local economies are stable and can offer decent employment opportunities for both displaced and national populations. Third, work with local partners to identify, fund and implement local solutions that drive towards outcomes. Finally, USAID should consider reforms to compliance requirements that align with the New Partnerships Initiative in terms of accessibility to a broader range of partners, while still taking an appropriate risk mitigation approach. U.S. assistance compliance requirements for its partners, as well as its low tolerance for risk, hinder more and better partnerships with local institutions.

2. Improve efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian operations.

Reduce impediments to humanitarian access, delivery and localization.

effective humanitarian operations. Two levels of policy and practice review should be conducted. First, U.S. leadership should review and revise existing suspensions of humanitarian assistance. Most immediately, USAID should lift its suspension of aid to northern Yemen, where implementing partners have been able to operate in a principled manner and needs of those impacted by the crisis are beyond dire. Second, the Administration should conduct a broader and more comprehensive review and revision of U.S. policies and practices related to humanitarian exemptions for humanitarian services to victims of conflict. In particular, U.S. sanctions should include clear humanitarian exceptions for food, medicine, medical and

and women-focused organizations. The policy should center both women and girls, seek to make USAID a leader in progress for the field, be evidence-based, and prioritize policy and programmatic interventions that will meet the expressed needs of the most marginalized women and girls.

Enhance joint planning and streamline reporting requirements.

U.S. aid agencies should enhance their joint planning efforts by formalizing joint planning as part of the annual budget and planning process. Joint plans can inform Country Development Cooperation Strategies (CDCS) to leverage development interventions in protracted emergencies and help guide resilience investments. In addition, U.S. aid agencies should adopt one grant and reporting format per award type (i.e., Public International Organization award, grant, cooperative agreement, contract) to create predictability and efficiencies in reporting. [Research](#) has shown that simplified and harmonized reporting can save staff time and generate cost efficiencies.

Develop and refine joint messaging for UN agencies.

State and USAID should agree to shared objectives for UN humanitarian agencies and deliver common messages about reform and system behavior across individual agency Executive Board meetings, framework partnership agreements, and other formal engagements. For example, State and USAID should have common positions on cash delivery, ~~man~~o(an)3(d)-3Z(U)5(S)4(A)4(2)

Recommended actions (continued)

Increase multiyear, flexible financing to UN agencies and NGOs and **require UN partners to disburse multiyear awards** commensurate to the multiyear financing they receive.

As a start, **champion a target amount of multiyear, flexible funding** from donors to UN agencies **that should be cascaded to partners.**

Update the USAID Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy through a consultative, multi-stakeholder, and evidence-based process, and prioritize the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act and passage of a strong International Violence Against Women Act.

Work with OCHA and other donors to standardize a set of core indicators to measure progress towards outcomes in humanitarian responses.

Adopt a single standard for financial reporting and transparency by all UN humanitarian partners to allow for a comprehensive understanding of the humanitarian response to a given crisis.

Reporting should include breakdown of assistance by crisis, country and sector, standard definitions and calculations for management costs and analysis of financing flows from UN partners to INGO and local implementers. PRM should report the same for use of MRA in the annual Congressional Budget Justification. All UN partners should meet standards for and report to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI).

International Rescue Committee (IRC)

their lives. Founded in 1933 at the request of Albert Einstein, IRC offers life-saving care and life-changing assistance to refugees forced to flee from war, persecution or natural disaster. At work today in over 40 countries and 29 cities in the U.S., we restore safety, dignity and hope to millions who are uprooted and struggling to endure. Visit [rescue.org](https://www.rescue.org) for more information.