Humanitarian Funding Priorities

Recommendations & Actions

Natural disasters, armed conflict, drought and famine in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Sudan and Syria have dramatically increased global humanitarian need. At the same time, funding levels have been affected by the global economic crisis, with many donors reducing assistance in key areas. The United States has long been a leader in humanitarian funding and continued U.S. leadership is needed now more than ever. USAID and the Department of State must be given the necessary resources to meet their humanitarian aid mandates. To this end, the U.S. should:

- Fund humanitarian accounts at the highest possible level.
  - Provide a robust level of funding for the Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) to help ensure a strong response to new conflict-related humanitarian emergencies and to address key U.S. humanitarian priorities including protection for the most vulnerable and prevention and response to gender-based violence and statelessness.
  - Increase funding for USAID’s Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) to address new emergencies and protracted crises. This reduces the risk of future disasters and helps meet early recovery needs, especially for those affected by conflict, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities.
- Increase PRM’s Emergency Refugee Migration Assistance (ERMA) funding ceiling to $200 million and allow the secretary of state, rather than the president, to authorize the use of funds from this account to ensure funds are released quickly.
- Provide funding for disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities. The number and intensity of natural disasters is increasing, negatively impacting communities living in coastal, urban areas, and those who depend on rain-fed agriculture. DRR activities help communities build resilience against climate-related changes and boost their ability to recover from future disasters.
- Give OFDA and PRM the capacity, authority and resources to provide multiyear funding for humanitarian projects that require a long-term commitment.
- Provide sufficient funding for and seek increased flexibility in U.S. food aid programs through greater use of cash-based emergency food assistance including local and regional purchasing where market conditions permit. When in-kind U.S. commodities are provided, ensure that the food is supplied efficiently, prepositioned whenever possible, distributed with nutrition education, and supplemented with quality complementary local foods when feasible.

Results

U.S. commitment to robust, flexible funding for humanitarian assistance saves lives, builds resiliency in communities, and underscores the United States’ role as a leader in defending vulnerable people around the world.
Background

Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration

The Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) has the primary responsibility for meeting the needs of refugees – individuals residing outside the borders of their country of origin due to persecution and conflict – and supports programs that provide key services such as shelter, water and health care. PRM also plays a role in meeting the needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in particular countries through its funding of the UN’s refugee agency (UNHCR) and other international organizations.

Increased funding for PRM can help the United States make substantial progress in meeting its longstanding priorities such as addressing gaps in protection for women and girls, internally displaced people, victims of sexual and gender based violence, and stateless persons. Focusing on these gaps would be in line with the U.S. government’s recently released Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence and would ensure that men, boys, women and girls have equal access to humanitarian assistance. Greater funding would also help support education and livelihood programs, which lay the groundwork for more sustainable development when conflict ends and ensure that displaced men and women can provide for themselves and their families.

In addition, higher PRM funding levels would support more effective implementation of important initiatives such as the U.S. government’s urban refugee principles, guidance adopted by PRM to help improve programs designed to reach urban refugees, a population that constitutes two-thirds of the total number of refugees. More funding would also support the U.S. government’s initiative on protracted refugees, which works toward durable solutions for refugees who have been exiled for many years and are unlikely to be able to return to their country of origin in the near future.

We also urge the U.S. government to double the funding ceiling for PRM’s Emergency Refugee Migration Assistance (ERMA) account, a funding stream that provides resources to PRM for refugee assistance during unanticipated crises. This account plays a critical role in ensuring that the United States is able to respond quickly to sudden emergencies, yet its funding ceiling has not been increased for over a decade. Furthermore, we ask that the secretary of state, rather than the president, be given the power to authorize the use of funds from the ERMA account so that PRM can act more swiftly in emergencies.

Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance

The USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) uses its resources to meet the needs of conflict- and disaster-affected people; address protracted emergencies; and conduct disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities, programs that help populations prepare for and mitigate the adverse impacts of disasters. Increased funding will help OFDA more effectively provide relief supplies and services to communities affected by conflict or disaster, and will also help OFDA better serve IDPs, a population whose needs have been historically underfunded. IDPs face many of the same challenges and needs as refugees, including abysmal camp conditions, lack of jobs and income, political marginalization, disease and hunger, but on average, IDPs receive roughly a third of the per capita assistance that refugees get. The quality of U.S. support for a displaced person should not hinge on something as arbitrary as whether he or she has succeeded in crossing a national border. Moreover, humanitarian needs in protracted IDP crises require a significant portion of OFDA’s annual resources, yet OFDA’s small budget means that it cannot meet these needs in a consistent or comprehensive manner.

Finally, due to climate change, natural disasters, including tsunamis, hurricanes and the droughts in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region, are on the rise. The world will continue to need to find ways to mitigate the effects of these crises. Increased funding of OFDA will support DRR activities that can help communities build resilience against climate-related changes to their environment and strengthen their ability to recover from disasters in the future. Currently, DRR efforts are woefully underfunded.

U.S. emergency food programs

Although U.S. contributions of in-kind food aid commodities are generous in scale, U.S. emergency food programs need greater flexibility. In-kind food assistance can be improved through increased efficiency, shorter delivery times and prepositioning whenever possible. Use of cash-based emergency food assistance tools, which address immediate needs of vulnerable populations in line with market conditions, is improving but remains limited. These programs include local and regional procurement (LRP) programs and voucher or cash transfer approaches. LRP also promotes regional market integration and supports surplus producers in adjacent areas. Sourcing food locally also reinforces production incentives for indigenous farmers. When local markets are still functioning, voucher and cash transfer programs provide a boost to the local economy while allowing hungry populations access to local goods.