Transitioning from Relief to Development

Recommendations & Actions

Even in the midst of an acute humanitarian emergency, it is essential to respond in ways that will enable crisis-affected people to withstand future shocks. Postemergency transition and recovery efforts can then lay the foundation for longer-term development. Humanitarian agencies should begin planning for the transition from relief to development even as the emergency response unfolds, and should engage development actors through joint assessments and programs as early as possible. This approach would include development expertise and principles that build on the gains made in the humanitarian phase, with the goal of building resilient individuals and communities. Such efforts are particularly important when emergencies threaten to become protracted: when a crisis-affected population begins to recover, but a wider solution to the lack of jobs, shelter, basic services and protection remains elusive.

To improve the transition from emergency relief to development, the U.S. government should undertake the following actions:

- Clarify the division of labor for managing the transition from relief to development among USAID and State Department offices;
- Require USAID missions in conflict or disaster-affected countries to report annually on how their development strategies programs build resilience and address, include and account for vulnerable populations recovering from disasters;
- Ensure U.S. government policy supports flexible funding for USAID missions so they can invest in programs focused on job creation, shelter, recovery from gender-based violence, and local capacity building, which are critical to the success of recovery efforts for disaster and conflict-affected populations but often lack an institutional home within USAID's development work;
- Build on efforts already underway to ensure humanitarian and development staff of the relevant U.S. government agencies are planning integrated responses that address long-term needs among especially vulnerable populations; and
- Ensure U.S. transition activities include strong emphases on conflict mitigation and disaster risk reduction.

Results

Strengthening coordination and promoting joint planning between USAID, its missions and U.S. humanitarian agencies will allow the U.S. government to consolidate the gains made in emergency response and ensure that the most vulnerable groups do not slip through the cracks in the critical recovery period.
Background

It is clear from recent humanitarian crises, such as the Haiti earthquake and Pakistan floods, that the U.S. government lacks effective mechanisms to facilitate the shift from emergency response to recovery and development. The United States is known as a generous and compassionate humanitarian donor, but the mechanisms by which the U.S. government transitions from emergency response into recovery and development assistance do not allow for the quick and flexible response necessary in these situations. Development programs require long-term planning prior to implementation and are not fast enough to adapt to rapidly evolving needs.

Supporting fragile states in achieving a measure of stability and economic development is a major policy priority for the U.S. government, with the majority of its foreign assistance spent in countries experiencing or emerging from civil strife. Yet the structure of U.S. assistance reflects an outmoded dichotomy between “relief” and “development” in which effective coordination and handover between the two is often discussed but rarely executed. The “transition gap” in countries recovering from natural disasters is just as acute.

Within USAID, it is unclear which office or bureau is responsible for ensuring a coherent transition strategy. Moreover, there is currently very little coordination between the U.S. government humanitarian agencies and the regional bureaus responsible for more traditional development assistance when programs transition from one type of assistance to another. While the Office of Transition Initiatives has the mandate to provide support during strategic political transitions, no U.S. government office is responsible or accountable for transitioning essential services to development actors. Other mechanisms, such as the Complex Crises Fund, could potentially help narrow the transition gap but lack adequate funding. The State Department’s Conflict Stabilization Office was recently revamped but focuses on a limited number of countries.

Due to the gap between humanitarian and development programs, USAID’s Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration tend to be drawn into de facto transitional development assistance, but lack clear mandates and appropriate tools to do so. Humanitarian programs have short funding cycles that do not facilitate medium- to long-term strategic planning. This complicates efforts to build program ownership and capacity among the affected populations, and prolongs the use of expensive relief-oriented program strategies.

There are many examples of humanitarian assistance programs ending without development assistance picking up support for basic social services. This has caused already vulnerable populations to lose access to health and education, which then contributes to continuing suffering and vulnerability. For example, OFDA spent over a half billion dollars over two years to provide critical lifesaving and recovery assistance in response to Haiti’s devastating earthquake. Three years later, donors consider the emergency phase to be over, although 390,000 people remain in squalid camps. Despite these needs, USAID’s Haiti mission is primarily focused on constructing an industrial park and port in a region largely unaffected by the earthquake. While this development project may contribute to Haiti’s economic growth in the long-term, the gap in assistance leaves thousands vulnerable and perpetuates extreme poverty.

The food crises in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region are prompting USAID to stress the importance of “resilience,” linking emergency and development responses under the framework of supporting programs that will enable communities to withstand future shocks. While the concept remains ill-defined, there are promising efforts underway to carry out USAID’s signature food security initiative, Feed the Future, to regions of countries where famine and food insecurity are particularly threatening. Joint planning by OFDA, Food for Peace and USAID staff in this context is welcome.

Of particular concern in communities coming out of conflict is the impact of sexual violence on survivors and their families. Addressing the physical, psychological and legal needs of women who have survived sexual violence is extremely important to the recovery process for communities and societies coming out of conflict. A comprehensive response to sexual violence, along with the reintegration of child soldiers, is often lost in this “relief to development” gap.

Another challenge is the chronic underfunding of disaster risk reduction activities, which support communities to assess their vulnerability to threats such as drought or floods and work to reduce their future exposure to those threats.1

To address the transition gap and allow for a more flexible response to situations that often fluctuate between emergency and recovery, the U.S. government’s humanitarian and development agencies should improve coordination and develop clear strategies to prevent gaps in basic social services during these critical periods.

1 See the Disaster Risk Reduction policy brief for more details.