

2015 AGM Concurrent Panel: “Dealing with Disaster”

This panel, organized by Bette Cook, had the objective of tracing the evolution disaster assistance from its initial focus on humanitarian disasters to dealing with complex and protracted emergencies. Diana Ohlbaum, who has held senior staff positions on the House and Senate foreign affairs authorization committees and served as Deputy Director of USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (1999-2001), moderated the panel. The three panelists have all served in senior positions in USAID and OFDA: Andrew Natsios (A/AID 2001-2006, AA/DCHA 1991-1993, OFDA Director 1989-1991), Bill Garvelink (DAA/DCHA, among other USAID and USG leadership positions) and Jeremy Konyndyk (current OFDA Director).

Diana Ohlbaum introduced the panel with a reminder to the audience that humanitarian assistance continues to enjoy broad support in the United States, including within the U.S. Congress. The problem, as she described it, is that there has been an explosion in the number and magnitude of emergencies, primarily political and accompanied by violence, with the result that the need for disaster assistance is increasing dramatically. The duration of the needs is also changing, with 80% of disaster funding now going to places needing support for three or more years. Two-thirds of the funding goes to areas requiring funding for eight or more years. Humanitarian assistance has more than doubled since 2011, according to Ohlbaum, but it is still inadequate to meet the growing needs. The humanitarian assistance system is being stretched to its limits. Ohlbaum also noted that the UN is hosting a Humanitarian Summit in 2016 in Istanbul to focus on reforms in the overall humanitarian system.

Andrew Natsios reviewed the rapid increase in need for disaster assistance from the late 80’s through his tenure at OFDA and DCHA, and later as USAID Administrator. He discussed the timely changes he and his team instituted in 1989 to deal with complex emergencies. These reforms included the creation of disaster assistance response teams (DARTs); creating a manual for DART team members (the Field Operations Guide); setting up a 24/7 Operations Center with US Forest Service assistance; creating a training center; setting up a new staffing pattern and eventually creating a separate career track (USAID Backstop 76) for OFDA officers; and creating an Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation.

Bill Garvelink pointed out the difficulty in allocating time and resources to preparedness, given more immediate needs when disaster strikes. Progress, he said, is being made in dealing with both of these concerns in places such as the Horn of Africa (e.g., in Ethiopia’s Somalia Region and Northern Kenya), where the Feed the Future (FtF) initiatives include a focus on areas with chronic emergencies. USAID missions are now doing joint planning for disaster and development. While this was not an initial focus of FtF, Garvelink would like to see these efforts to integrate disaster preparedness and development under the umbrella of “resilience” expand beyond the Horn of Africa and the Sahel and be institutionalized more broadly within the Agency.

Jeremy Konyndyk noted the culture of adaptation and adjustment in OFDA – learning from mistakes and documenting the lessons learned -- but also the increasing strain on the system due to continuing increase of humanitarian emergencies, e.g., in Syria, South Sudan, Yemen, plus the Ebola crisis. He noted the lack of a true global humanitarian response

system, due to the patchwork of agencies and responses that have evolved over time. OFDA/USAID is participating actively in global effort to create a reform agenda, in preparation for the international summit in Istanbul next year. He also described how OFDA has built capacity to take leadership in a “whole-of-government” response since the failings of the Haiti response, leading to the success of OFDA’s direction of the Ebola response. OFDA is now staffing to mount three responses simultaneously, with one team in reserve.

The panelists made numerous other observations during the Q&A session:

- The world cannot tackle the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) without engaging in countries with complex humanitarian emergencies; the countries themselves are asking for assistance with protracted displacement and political problems (e.g., Jordan, Nigeria). As a reflection of this, for the first time, the World Bank President (Dr. Kim) has a Senior Advisor on Humanitarian Relief.
- The whole-of-government approach will not work due to domestic agendas and interest groups (e.g., the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services). USAID should be made a Cabinet-level agency in order to play its leadership role more effectively.
- Most United Nations agencies operate on a patronage system and are not accountable. The United States therefore provides funding for designated purposes when giving grants to UN agencies. The Ebola response shows the wisdom of this approach, which worked due to a heavy U.S. footprint on the ground to monitor the use of U.S. Government funds.
- The whole-of-government approach can work if it is done as a pull, not push, approach, with the DART team making the requests to other U.S. Government agencies, as in the Ebola response.
- OFDA works successfully with the “science-based” USG agencies, such as the US Geological Survey, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the U.S. Park and Forest Services, through RSSA arrangements. Many of these agencies lack strong domestic constituencies.
- OFDA’s “notwithstanding” authority is critical to its success; it can waive competition and seek partners with the best expertise.
- The dilemma of “ossification” makes changing bureaucracies difficult, due to multiple patches without true reform.
- Gender awareness has been built into OFDA’s grant system. It assumes that gender issues are there and tries to find them, looking for demand signals from the field.
- There is no magic bullet for breaking the cycle of crises, but recent research in Ethiopia found that areas in which peace-building had been done coped better than others.
- Cell phone technology may improve food distribution in emergencies with mobile cash and mobile banking, but it is still too early to tell.