



Humanitarian Assistance: Lessons for the Future

For years, USAID has been the U.S. government's lead agency for international humanitarian assistance. In the last decade alone, the Agency funded more than \$70 billion in food, healthcare, shelter, water, sanitation, and other lifesaving supplies needed during disasters and crisis conditions overseas. Crisis environments are by their very nature unstable and insecure, such as the war zones in Ukraine, Gaza, and Syria; massive population displacement in Iraq and Northern Ethiopia; and, more recently, the earthquake in Burma. Substantial uncertainty and inaccessibility, coupled with the rapid flow of large amounts of money, create prime opportunities for fraud and diversion—risks that have intensified with the growing scale and duration of humanitarian responses. USAID faced difficulty managing these challenges while distributing and overseeing humanitarian assistance. As the administration determines the future of foreign assistance, we offer lessons from our oversight of humanitarian assistance programs to learn from past experiences and enhance future responses.

Key Lessons Learned

Given USAID's lead role in humanitarian assistance, OIG has been the primary entity conducting oversight of the U.S. government's responses. We have reported extensively on the challenges that persist in effectively delivering humanitarian assistance and managing risks of fraud, waste, and abuse in crisis environments. As a result of our findings and recommendations, USAID strengthened its risk management of this assistance by developing mitigation measures, such as a fraud risk management framework and risk assessments incorporated into the award application process. However, more opportunities exist to enhance humanitarian assistance. Based on our large body of oversight work from fiscal years 2015–2025, we have identified four key lessons learned that underpin an effective response. Addressing these lessons will better position the U.S. government to increase the effectiveness, efficiency, and impact of future humanitarian assistance responses; strengthen accountability; and reduce the risks of fraud, waste, and abuse while providing critical and rapid lifesaving relief in difficult conditions.

What We Learned

Monitoring gaps in unstable and restrictive environments reduced the effectiveness of humanitarian responses.

Monitoring approaches—such as conducting site visits, collecting data from implementers, and using third-party monitoring—tailored to unstable and conflict settings help track progress, verify results, and mitigate heightened risks of fraud and diversion. Planning for third-party monitor support can bolster oversight efforts where U.S. officials cannot directly observe programs due to insecurity or access constraints.

How We Got There

We reported that USAID's response to the Ebola epidemic—a complex emergency spanning multiple countries in West Africa—funded more than \$440 million in treatment units, care centers, and medical supplies, but lacked an effective monitoring system. This hindered USAID's ability to ensure efficient use of funds, which contributed to the Agency allocating resources to treatment units and care centers that did not significantly contribute to controlling the outbreak. In addition, we reported that planning and assessment gaps impeded the effectiveness of USAID's monitoring and significantly delayed the acquisition of third-party monitors for large-scale humanitarian responses in Africa's Lake Chad region and Ethiopia. This was despite both being environments where USAID staff could not consistently visit program sites and bad actors sought to exploit humanitarian assistance intended for the most vulnerable people.

What We Learned

How We Got There

The lack of a sustainable workforce undermined the effectiveness of humanitarian responses. Over-reliance on contractors, short-term and rotational assignments, gaps in key oversight roles, prolonged vacancies, and high turnover result in loss of institutional knowledge and diminished oversight. Developing workforce plans tailored to disaster and crisis responses can improve continuity of operations.

Most of USAID's humanitarian workforce consisted of short-term contract staff. This model provided rapid deployment capabilities but included lengthy hiring processes and high vacancies. We reported that USAID responses, such as those in Burma, Ethiopia, and West Africa, consistently had too few designated officials to provide required oversight and administration of humanitarian assistance awards. Further, short-term deployments led to high turnover during critical responses. For example, during the Ebola crisis, response team staff rotated out every 7 to 9 weeks, with some positions turning over six to seven times in 1 year. This created institutional knowledge gaps and operational inconsistencies, with one implementer noting that it altered its approach 22 times over 8 months to accommodate shifting preferences among rotating staff.

Poor strategic planning and coordination limited the ability to adapt to protracted crises. Humanitarian crises are becoming increasingly prolonged, with the average crisis lasting 9 years. Strategic planning and a coordinated approach are needed to transition from providing immediate, lifesaving assistance at the outset of a crisis to addressing long-term, non-emergency needs.

For example, in Iraq, up to 3.4 million people were internally displaced due to armed conflict. In response, USAID spent \$2.2 billion to provide immediate lifesaving aid. However, as the crisis continued, we found that USAID's ability to shift its response to address longer-term needs, such as rehabilitation of schools and hospitals, was hindered by poor planning, uncertain funding, and a lack of guidance for coordinating efforts internally and with other stakeholders, such as foreign governments, community leaders, and implementers. We found that this was also evident in USAID's response to the Rohingya crisis in Burma, which internally displaced over 150,000 Rohingya and led to more than 940,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. USAID provided \$709 million to address immediate, short-term food and nutrition needs for the Rohingya, but struggled to transition its assistance to meet longer-term needs in part due to the government of Bangladesh's lack of support for the Agency's assistance for Rohingya refugees.

Gaps in policies and procedures jeopardized the timeliness of humanitarian assistance and increased risks. Policies and procedures support operational efficiency and effectiveness; reduce risks; and help ensure vulnerable populations receive shelter, food, and medicine. These include policies and procedures for initial and ongoing need assessments; fraud risk management that incorporates leading practices; and measures to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse.

We found that USAID's initial assessment of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa lacked critical information, which hindered the Agency's ability to accurately identify resources needed and ensure a timely response. For example, most Ebola treatment units and community care centers opened after the height of the outbreak. Similarly, more than \$32 million in protective equipment was not procured until after 94 percent of confirmed cases occurred. In addition, we found that USAID's policies did not require implementers to apply leading practices for fraud risk management. This resulted in an implementer enrolling ineligible individuals affiliated with the government of Colombia into a cash assistance program during the Agency's response to the Venezuela regional crisis. Further, we reported that in Ukraine, USAID did not fully monitor implementers' measures to protect beneficiaries from sexual exploitation and abuse because it lacked policy requirements and guidance for these activities.

Scope and Methodology

We conducted this work under the Council of the Inspectors General for Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation*. Our objective was to identify key lessons from our prior oversight work that are relevant for the planned realignment of USAID programming. Our review focused on OIG's oversight of USAID humanitarian assistance programming from fiscal years 2015–2025, encompassing 22 relevant audit, inspection, and evaluation reports. We analyzed each report's findings and recommendations to identify and summarize key themes and inform the lessons learned.

Related OIG Products

Addressing Weaknesses in Monitoring

- [USAID Has Gaps in Planning, Risk Mitigation, and Monitoring of Its Humanitarian Assistance in Africa's Lake Chad Region](#) (4-000-21-001-P), October 2020.
- [Weaknesses in Oversight of USAID's Syria Response Point to the Need for Enhanced Management of Fraud Risks in Humanitarian Assistance](#) (8-000-21-001-P), March 2021.
- [Emergency Food Assistance in Ethiopia: Gaps in USAID's Award Administration, Monitoring, and Incident Reporting Hindered Its Ability to Detect Widespread Food Diversion](#) (E-000-25-002-M), February 2025.

Ensuring Sustainability of Staffing

- [Assessment and Oversight Gaps Hindered OFDA's Decision Making About Medical Funding During the Ebola Response](#) (9-000-18-002-P), January 2018.
- [Contractor Use for Disaster and Stabilization Responses: USAID Is Constrained by Funding Structure but Better Data Collection Could Improve Workforce Planning](#) (E-000-22-002-M), September 2022.

Adapting to Protracted Emergencies

- [Survey of Selected USAID/ Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance Programs in Iraq](#) (8-267-16-001-S), February 2016.
- [Enhanced Guidance and Practices Would Improve USAID's Transition Planning and Third-Party Monitoring in Iraq](#) (9-266-21-003-P), February 2022.
- [Rohingya Crisis: Ongoing Challenges Limit USAID's Ability to Move From Humanitarian to Development Assistance](#) (5-000-24-001-P), January 2024.

Strengthening Policies and Procedures

- [Enhanced Processes and Implementer Requirements Are Needed to Address Challenges and Fraud Risks in USAID's Venezuela Response](#) (9-000-21-005-P), April 2021.
- [USAID Should Implement Additional Controls to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Beneficiaries](#) (9-000-21-006-P), May 2021.
- [Ukraine Response: USAID Can Strengthen Efforts to Ensure Compliance and Improve Monitoring to Protect Against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse for Humanitarian Assistance](#) (E-000-25-001-M), February 2025.