

**Foreign Aid Reform:
Principles for United States Humanitarian Assistance
Endorsed by 27 U.S.-based NGOs
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Humanitarian response is a vital part of the United States foreign assistance program. Despite its importance, draft proposals and discussions of foreign aid reform to date have focused almost exclusively on modernizing U.S. development assistance. The purpose of this brief statement is to propose the core principles that should guide U.S. humanitarian assistance in the interests of ensuring that any foreign aid reform initiative encompasses both humanitarian and development aspects of U.S. international assistance.

Background

At least since the end of the Second World War the United States has been a leader in responding to humanitarian emergencies. The U.S. helped design and has been the largest funder of the international humanitarian aid system, including United Nations agencies, such as the World Food Program and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and the International Committee of the Red Cross and other international non-governmental organizations. The framework laid out in the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961 established and continues to govern the humanitarian component of the U.S. foreign aid program.

Major challenges face the United States in supporting humanitarian programs. Overall needs are increasing due to ongoing conflicts and the increasing number and scale of natural disasters in an era of climate change. Underfunding and misallocation of resources within the international humanitarian system are chronic. The U.S. is unable to meet all of the needs of internally displaced people, whose numbers are rising significantly compared to those of refugees. People recovering from large-scale and protracted emergencies suffer from insufficient support as they try to rebuild their communities. Women and children remain especially vulnerable to sexual abuse and other human rights violations.

While the U.S. has been a generous donor in absolute terms, it lags well behind other major industrial countries in per capita assistance and assistance as a percentage of the national budget. Like some other countries, the U.S. struggles to respond to humanitarian crises based on need alone, sometimes allowing itself to be driven primarily by consideration of foreign policy and national security objectives.

Purpose

The purpose of humanitarian assistance is to alleviate suffering, maintain human dignity and uphold rights through the provision of life saving support for the most vulnerable people in times of acute need. Effective humanitarian assistance lays the foundation for recovery and sustainable development. It cannot and should not substitute, however, for the diplomatic engagement required to create peace and stability.

Humanitarian crises present a moral challenge to the United States. A robust and coordinated response to humanitarian emergencies should be an obligation and a foreign policy priority. U.S. humanitarian assistance should have clearly stated goals for its operation, established principles for how assistance should be administered, and priorities that help identify where assistance and protection are most needed.

Principles

- Assistance should be based on and allocated in proportion to humanitarian need.
- Assistance should be provided impartially without regard to the political views, national origin or religious affiliation of the beneficiaries.
- U.S. humanitarian funding should be consistent with international protection standards and in furtherance of international humanitarian law, refugee law, and the protection of human rights.
- In keeping with the humanitarian imperative, the U.S. should use its leverage to assist humanitarian agencies in obtaining secure, unfettered access to survivors in crisis situations.
- While the distribution of humanitarian aid is authorized through the Foreign Assistance Act, administration of such aid should be governed by international treaties and agreements to which the U.S. is a signatory.
- U.S. policy should require that humanitarian assistance programs strive to abide by internationally agreed upon standards, including Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidelines, the Sphere Standards, and the Principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship.
- The U.S. should ensure that non-humanitarian U.S. foreign aid, including foreign aid programs administered by departments other than State, complements U.S. humanitarian assistance programs, and that all aid meets international humanitarian law and human rights standards.
- U.S. humanitarian assistance programs should be implemented by inter-governmental and non-governmental international humanitarian organizations. When the military is required to support a humanitarian response, civilian agencies should be in the lead and have the requisite capacity to perform this leadership role.
- Assistance should be provided quickly and efficiently.
- Funds for humanitarian response should be appropriated annually at a sufficient level to assure an overall U.S. response commensurate with the need, including for protracted emergencies. An emergency draw down fund should be supported to ensure that capacity for rapid response to emergencies is maintained at all times.
- Humanitarian, recovery, and development programs should be coordinated and planned to address post-conflict and post-disaster relief to development transitions. Funding mechanisms should ensure continuity of life-sustaining services during transition phases.
- The U.S. should work to ensure that its assistance programs operate harmoniously with those of other countries and multilateral institutions.
- The U.S. should strive to maintain accountability and to learn from its experience. Independent government agencies should review and evaluate programs on a regular basis to ensure that best practices are being followed and that programs are effective and transparent, in keeping with humanitarian principles.

List of endorsing organizations (in alphabetical order):

American Joint Distribution Committee
American Red Cross International Services
American Refugee Committee
AMREF
Brother's Brother Foundation
CARE
Christian Children's Fund
Church World Service
Food for the Hungry
Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
Helen Keller International
International Medical Corps
International Rescue Committee
Islamic Relief USA
Jesuit Refugee Service USA
Liberty in North Korea
Mercy Corps
Operation USA
Oxfam America
Pan American Development Foundation
Pathfinder International
Plan USA
Refugees International
Relief International
Save the Children
Women's Refugee Commission
World Vision