

Joint Humanitarian Operations: How to Bring US Humanitarian Assistance into the 21st Century

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The [Government Reform and Reorganization Plan](#) released earlier this year by the White House calls for substantial reform of US humanitarian institutions. The plan mandates that the State Department and USAID produce a “specific reorganization proposal” to “optimize” humanitarian assistance and “eliminate duplication of efforts and fragmentation of decision-making.” This policy note lays out guidance for how an ambitious but feasible optimization could be achieved. It is informed by two high-level private roundtables convened by the Center for Global Development to solicit expert input, as well as a desk review of documents, expert interviews, and the author’s own experiences serving in the humanitarian arms of both USAID and the State Department. While numerous experts contributed thoughts and feedback, the author takes sole responsibility for the views represented herein.

OVERVIEW

Leadership in global humanitarian response is a core strength of US foreign policy. US humanitarian programs advance dual national interests: reflecting essential American values by aiding those in need, and helping to address geostrategic challenges like famine, disease outbreaks, conflict, and displacement. Humanitarian response receives overwhelming support from the American public, with recent polling finding that more than four in five Americans, including large majorities in both parties, favor robust humanitarian aid budgets.¹ The current [White House National Security Strategy](#) highlights the importance of reducing human suffering through continued US leadership in humanitarian assistance.² This view is mirrored in Congress, where US humanitarian programs have long enjoyed deep bipartisan support.

In line with this deep public and political support, American intellectual and financial contributions undergird the international humanitarian architecture. The US government traditionally supplies between one-quarter and one-third³ of global public relief resources, and also significantly shapes international humanitarian policy and practice. The US pairs this resource support with a level of accompanying engagement—oversight, diplomatic outreach, technical innovation, and operational accountability—that few other countries can match. Sustaining this leadership is critical to sustaining global humanitarian action, and to ensuring the best value for US taxpayer’s investments.

1 Steven Kull, “American Public Support for Foreign Aid in the Age of Trump” 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/global-20170731-blum-stevenkull-brief-6.pdf>

2 National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017, page 42. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

3 Development Initiatives, Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2018 <http://devinit.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/GHA-Report-2018-chapter-3.pdf>

ACHIEVING JOINT OPERATIONS: THE GOLDWATER-NICHOLS REFORMS

The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 emerged from the failure of the Desert One hostage rescue mission in Iran in 1980, and shortcomings in the 1983 US invasion of Grenada. Both operations were undermined by siloed combat activities, competing inter-service chains of command, and weak inter-service planning and communication.

Under the Act, the military chain of command was unified and streamlined. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the individual service chiefs were precluded from exercising command of military combat operations. Instead, combat operations were shifted to a joint combatant command structure, which integrated all services at a regional level. To ensure holistic input on defense strategy, the Act designated the chairman, rather than the individual service chiefs, as the principal military advisor to the White House and secretary of Defense. The Act also mandated joint education across the services, and introduced formal requirements that military officers seek joint billets as a prerequisite for obtaining flag rank promotions.

Experts credit the Goldwater-Nichols reforms with significantly improving US military effectiveness. Former Defense Secretary William Perry credits the chain-of-command reforms with tactical successes in Desert Storm, as well as US interventions in Haiti and Bosnia. Former Deputy Defense Secretary John Hamre—who helped to shape Goldwater-Nichols as a congressional staffer in the 1980s—cites “the structural changes and incentives established by Goldwater-Nichols” as foundational to current US military effectiveness.

At the same time, this leadership role means that the American government’s foibles—notably the fragmentation of its own humanitarian structures—are reflected and magnified in the global architecture. US relief aid funding, which in 2018 exceeded \$9 billion, has long been divided across three different offices at USAID and the State Department. Each of these offices—State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), USAID’s Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), and its Office of Food for Peace (FFP)—applies different and often inconsistent operating models, staffing configurations, administrative systems, and program priorities. These inconsistencies in turn translate onward to the grantees⁴ that they support in the wider humanitarian system, diminishing the collective effectiveness of US assistance. **The US has long pressed for enhanced coherence, quality, and efficiency from its UN and NGO partners; it is time that the US government placed these same demands upon itself.**

In the 1970s–80s, the Department of Defense faced a similar challenge. Rivalries between the services, and their inconsistent systems, impeded the collective effectiveness of the US military. The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 mandated a major overhaul of inter-service dynamics that is widely credited with helping the military to move past the worst of those rivalries and become a more modern and effective force. Importantly, Goldwater-Nichols sought to do this not by collapsing the services together, but by maintaining their distinctive strengths within a more unified chain of operational command and mandating greater cross-service integration. **As the US Government grapples with how best to reconfigure its humanitarian engagement, it should adopt a Goldwater-Nichols approach: a strategy that does not collapse together the distinctive institutional roles and strengths of USAID and State, but rather unifies US humanitarian field operations and policy engagement and builds dramatically greater interoperability between their models.**

⁴ There are several predominant types of instruments that the USG uses in humanitarian giving: project-level grants and cooperative agreements with NGO partners, and appeal-level contributions with public international organization partners. For simplicity’s sake, this note refers to all as “grants.”

BACKGROUND

Reforming USG humanitarian structures is a valid objective, but also a thorny one. Much like the military in the early 1980s, the existing humanitarian offices combine enormous competence and expertise within outdated legacy structures. The call for reform in the White House reorganization document reflects the reality that existing US government humanitarian institutions have evolved from very different origins and were created for very different challenges. Addressing the existing dysfunction without disrupting the existing excellence will take deft management and a clear vision.

Each office has a distinct history. PRM evolved from a modest unit created within the State Department's Bureau of Security and Consular Affairs in the early 1960s to coordinate refugee and migration affairs.⁵ The Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance began as a small office tasked with coordinating the natural disaster relief efforts of other government agencies—with few resources of its own.⁶ And USAID's Office of Food for Peace grew out of a program initially created to charitably dispose of surplus US agricultural commodities.⁷ Each of these three entities evolved dramatically over the ensuing half century, as the humanitarian sector itself evolved and grew. The three offices now manage resources topping \$9 billion and employ hundreds of staff in Washington and field offices around the world. Each has earned a well-deserved reputation for excellence and expertise in its domain.

The question of whether, and how, to rationalize these structures is not a new one—but past reviews have not produced major changes. The Clinton administration conducted an intensive review of this question in its final year, identifying problems including incoherent leadership, onerous interagency coordination characterized by mandate overlap and duplication, and failure to leverage US global policy influence on par with the scale of US resources⁸ (issues that echo concerns raised in the White House reform document). The Clinton-era study produced a range of recommendations but deferred a final decision to incoming Secretary Powell, who ultimately did not take them forward. The Bush administration did, however, take other steps to reform US humanitarian programs. President Bush proposed sweeping reforms to US food aid programs, seeking to reduce the onerous and inefficient requirement of buying only US agricultural commodities. These reforms have been carried forward under subsequent administrations. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also elevated humanitarian assistance as a core priority of US foreign assistance under her “F Process,” which reorganized US aid budgeting.

The question of State's and USAID's humanitarian roles reemerged under President Obama, becoming a contentious element of the inaugural Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) process initiated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. That process spurred a low-grade turf war between the USAID and State humanitarian teams as it considered sweeping reorganization options. But in the end the QDDR defaulted to relatively modest proposals for reform, such as the establishment of an assistant secretary-level policy coordination body (the Humanitarian Policy Working Group) across the three offices and State's International Organizations Bureau. The working group became a helpful forum for coordinating policy aims during that administration but did not produce fundamental harmonization or integration between the humanitarian offices. A separate internal USAID review process toward the end of the Obama administration recommended a major reorganization and consolidation of OFDA and FFP within USAID but deferred a decision to the incoming administration.

5 <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/timeline/1960-1969>

6 <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=776900>

7 <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/pl-480>

8 <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB30/>

These issues have gained new momentum under the Trump administration. USAID's leadership has wisely begun pursuing an OFDA-FFP merger, while also asserting that USAID should play a larger role in refugee aid rather than leaving it solely to the State Department. State and USAID have responded to the mandate for optimization in the Government Reform and Reorganization Plan by announcing a new Humanitarian Assistance Steering Council. Its authorities and functions remain unclear, but its composition parallels that of the Humanitarian Policy Working Group established under the QDDR process during Secretary Clinton's tenure. As this note outlines below, optimization will only come through difficult functional changes—and the Humanitarian Assistance Steering Council's impact will depend on whether it is truly empowered and inclined to drive such changes.

The White House's simultaneous push to significantly restrict and reshape US immigration and refugee policy has put tremendous pressure on PRM and at times raised speculation that its functions may be folded into USAID and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The establishment of the new steering council suggests that dismantling PRM is unlikely. But the White House's continuing emphasis on severely restricting longstanding US refugee and asylum protections is prompting considerable opposition and will complicate the process of building political support for any proposed reforms to USG humanitarian structures. Outside stakeholders on the Hill and in the advocacy community will carefully parse whether proposals relating to PRM would in fact improve the efficacy of US humanitarian relief, or simply serve as a backdoor approach to further limiting US refugee protections.

HOW DO THINGS WORK NOW?

USAID's and State's humanitarian capacities have evolved on distinct trajectories, with separate funding streams and authorizing legislation (summarized in figure 1). As a result of these varying histories, the offices have developed different and at times inconsistent program models. USAID's response model is extremely hands-on and prioritizes direct grant-making to, and operational engagement with, frontline aid providers. In major new non-refugee emergencies, USAID will frequently deploy a large Disaster Assistance Response Team composed of disaster experts who directly mount and manage US-funded programs and operations. While the bulk of the program delivery is carried out by UN and NGO grantees, USAID's model affords the US a high degree of oversight and direct influence over the course of the overall response effort. In non-DART emergencies, USAID applies a similar approach, albeit on a smaller scale.

Within USAID, OFDA and FFP have traditionally applied different variants of this approach. While both deploy via the DART platform for major emergencies, OFDA has tended to work primarily with NGO grantees and secondarily with public international organization (PIO) grantees—supporting each type of grantee based on its comparative advantages (e.g., funding an NGO for frontline aid delivery but a UN agency for sector-wide support and coordination functions). FFP, in line with its food security mandate, predominantly supports the UN World Food Programme (WFP), whose logistics and food distribution capabilities are unparalleled. But it does not treat WFP as a default option; the office simultaneously supports a wide range of NGOs with complementary capabilities. This enables FFP, too, to work with whichever partner is best suited to the context. In instances where WFP is unable or unsuited to respond at scale (e.g., in Northern Syria when WFP was blocked from responding by the Syrian government, or in Ethiopia, where NGO partners sometimes have greater capacity to scale up quickly),

FFP's NGO partnerships provide strong programming, and allow FFP to keep WFP's feet to the fire. NGOs are also FFP's lead partners on development food aid programs, which build resilience in vulnerable communities and so reduce the long-term need for emergency aid.

FIGURE 1. Overview of US Humanitarian Offices

	USAID – Office of Food for Peace	USAID – Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance	State – Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration
Legislative and Policy Origins	The Food for Peace program was established under the 1954 Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act, as a means of exporting US agricultural surpluses. The Food For Peace Act of 1966 replaced the ATDA and deepened the focus on relief programs. Additional periodic changes were made under subsequent Farm Bills, notably pilot flexibility reforms in 2008. The Global Food Security Act of 2016 granted additional authorities related to non-commodity food assistance programs.	A “Foreign Disaster Relief Coordination” office was established at USAID in 1964 following weakly-managed US relief responses to the 1963 Skopje earthquake and Costa Rica volcanic eruption. The Foreign Assistance Act was amended in 1975 to authorize the President to provide needs-based aid to natural and man-made disasters, and to designate a Special Coordinator for International Disaster Relief. This designation sits with the USAID Administrator and its functions are delegated to OFDA.	The 1962 Migration and Refugee Assistance Act authorized the State Department to support refugees fleeing communist regimes during the Cold War. The 1980 Refugee Act brought US law into line with obligations under the UN Refugee Convention and systematized the US refugee admissions process. State’s Bureau of Refugee Programs was established the same year, and reorganized into PRM in 1994 when migration and population issues were added to its portfolio.
Principal Functions	Reduce hunger and malnutrition, and ensure access to safe and nutritious food, in contexts of acute or chronic food insecurity.	Lead federal coordination for international disaster response, and manage most non-food relief aid to non-refugee populations.	Assistance, protection, and policy coordination related to refugee, migration, and population affairs.
FY 2017 Spending	\$3.615 billion, through the Food for Peace Title II account (agriculture appropriations) and the International Disaster Assistance account (State and Foreign Operations appropriations)	\$2.022 billion through the International Disaster Assistance account (State and Foreign Operations appropriations)	\$3.358 billion through the Migration and Refugee Assistance account and the Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance account (State and Foreign Operations appropriations)

State/PRM’s response model is premised on working principally through PIO partners, with a much lighter direct USG footprint. This approach applies mainly to refugee-related emergencies, but also to PIOs like the Red Cross that work in non-refugee settings. The bulk of PRM’s funding has traditionally gone to UNHCR, UNRWA, IOM, and ICRC, and it is the principal USG funder of these institutions; **less than 10 percent** of PRM’s funding goes to NGOs.⁹ US funding to these PIOs critically underpins their ability to carry out their core functions. PRM’s staffing model is considerably lighter than USAID’s, with roving field-based refugee coordinators individually overseeing funding across multiple countries and emergencies. This model minimizes USG internal overhead on program costs, while in effect delegating program administration and strategy functions (and their related costs) to PRM’s PIO grantees. PRM then manages and governs those grantees at a macro level through framework agreements, participation in their governing boards, and periodic field oversight visits.

⁹ <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/278480.pdf>

Each model reflects a different philosophy, with its own pros and cons. PRM's model requires a lighter administrative footprint for the USG, while focusing USG oversight primarily at a macro level rather than an operational level. It approaches PIOs as shared multilateral institutions and invests in their success collectively with other donors, rather than funding extensive standalone NGO programs in parallel to PIO efforts. This approach can help leverage non-USG resources from other donors toward a multilateral relief program, and PIO grantees argue that it enables economies of scale and more comprehensive coverage of needs. This approach does, however, make PRM's program-level impact heavily dependent on the effectiveness of its PIO partners. In instances where those partners prove incapable, PRM's model lacks a scalable backup option.

While both models keep overhead costs low relative to total program expenditures, USAID's more operational model requires a heavier administrative footprint. In FY17 OFDA spent 7.2 percent¹⁰ of its budget on staffing and overhead, while PRM spent just 1.3 percent.¹¹ This larger investment gives USAID the bandwidth to in-source field-level program strategy and administration within its own team, maintain a robust overseas presence, and provide response funding more directly to frontline grantees rather than using PIOs as financial middlemen. Program administration must be carried out and paid for at some level; USAID's approach situates more of this capacity within the US government whereas PRM's light-footprint approach situates it within its PIO partners.

While each office's approach has merits, it is important to underscore that there is a strong US interest both in supporting robust frontline NGO operations and in sustaining appropriately robust baseline PIO capacity. A heavy tilt toward PIO funding can leave the US government overly dependent on its PIO partners, and with diminished influence over the direction of a relief operation. USAID's model shortchanges important multilateral response capacity in favor of USG in-house capacity. But the upside is that the United States has a singular capacity among donor governments to deploy large, rapid teams of experts to emergencies. This can serve as a useful check on, and complement to, the UN's own efforts—as witnessed in the Ebola response, when USAID was able to pick up the slack created by the UN's early failings.

Still, funding PIOs only as “the exception, not the rule” (as mandated by a recent USAID policy change¹²) risks undermining the vital roles that PIOs do play in the global humanitarian architecture. The major PIOs have indispensable roles in setting strategy, establishing technical standards, leading operational and policy coordination, conducting high-level political engagement with disaster-affected states, and other normative functions that NGOs could never realistically or legitimately play. Strong global PIOs can also tackle challenges with a comprehensiveness and scale that NGOs would struggle to replicate.

Capable PIOs are also important to US goals of promoting financial burden-sharing with other donors. Small and mid-size donors, as well as emerging donors, rely heavily on multilateral funding channels because they do not have the degree of direct grant-making bandwidth that the USG maintains. Ensuring a reasonable level of US support toward jointly funded PIOs can often provide the best channel for leveraging those donors' funding toward shared priorities. Pulling back US support for multilateral institutions would, conversely, increase the risks of US and other donors' funds going toward divergent or even counterproductive priorities.

¹⁰ https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TBf1.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/278480.pdf>

¹² USAID Automated Directives System 308 – Agreements with Public International Organizations <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1876/308.pdf>

WHAT SHOULD “REFORM” SEEK TO FIX?

In the pre-Goldwater-Nichols era, the inability of the different military services’ radios to communicate with each other in Iran and Grenada became a [famous microcosm of larger inter-service disconnects](#).¹³ The services, each very capable in their own right, struggled mightily when tasked with doing something jointly. The diverse humanitarian models within the US government likewise do many things well individually—but also struggle to produce effective joint efforts. The challenge for any reform of these institutions is how best to harmonize US policy leadership and influence, program delivery models, and administrative functions without weakening the quality and responsiveness of US humanitarian leadership.

To achieve this, it is important to be clear on what problems a reform agenda seeks to solve. The research process for this note identified a number of shortcomings that could be targets for reform:

- **Needs analysis and strategic planning gaps.** Among the problems that inspired the Goldwater-Nichols reforms at DoD was a recognition that silos among the services undermined their collective effectiveness. In the 1983 Grenada invasion, the Army and Marines “[conducted parallel operations in isolation](#)” in different parts of the island, applying different tactics and unable to communicate directly with each other.

Humanitarian analysis and planning within the USG suffer from similar divisions. Each humanitarian office has traditionally applied a different needs analysis model and planning schedule. OFDA’s model is heavily driven by its field teams and the rhythm of new emergencies; PRM’s model is heavily reliant on the input and judgment of its predominant PIO partners; and FFP’s model is driven by rolling forecasts of emerging food security needs and the management of FFP’s in-kind food pipeline. Thus at any given time, USG program planning for different dimensions of a single crisis may be at different phases in each of the three offices, making a unified USG approach very difficult to achieve.¹⁴

- **Inconsistent response operations.** The USG’s differing programming models and planning cycles mean that the US response to a crisis can vary significantly depending on whether it is USAID- or PRM-led. In natural disasters, food crises, and non-refugee conflict crises, USAID applies its hands-on response model and develops its own response strategy in conjunction with the multi-lateral system. In refugee emergencies, PRM works principally through PIO grantees and relies on them heavily for its response strategy. As a result, the US has less direct influence over field-level strategy in refugee responses than it has in other areas, and fewer fallback options if the UN agencies are falling short.

Equally important is the fact that few modern crises fall neatly into a single category—most conflict crises spawn both internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugee flows, and often trigger severe food crises. Thus in practice, the US frequently applies inconsistent response models toward the same emergency, and even toward grantees working in the same context. Like the Army and Marines in Grenada, USAID and State/PRM will apply different and weakly coordinated approaches on different elements of the same multi-faceted crises—a dynamic that is mimicked by their respective grantees. This has proved problematic in the Venezuela, Bangladesh/Rohingya, and Syria crises, among others.

¹³ <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44474.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/reflections-looking-back-need-goldwater-nichols>

- **Impediments to meaningful multilateral oversight and reform.** The US is atypical among major donors in that its governance of, and funding for, the principal humanitarian PIO institutions sit across different offices and agencies. This means that each major UN and multilateral agency has a different “client” within the US government, each with its own priorities and funding models. OFDA manages the USG’s relationship with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA); PRM manages the relationships with the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), UN Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and International Organization for Migration (IOM); FFP its relationship with the World Food Programme; the Department of Health and Human Services manages the relationship with the World Health Organization; and State’s International Organizations Bureau manages the relationships with UNICEF and the UN Development Programme.

When something arises that straddles these equities—such as representation in high-level donor policy meetings—the USG is frequently represented jointly by both State and USAID, occupying two seats where all other countries occupy just one. Beyond the annoyance this creates for the US’s donor partners, this two-headed approach weakens the USG’s ability to advance system-wide coherence and reform because no single part of the USG is responsible for overseeing—and when necessary, reconciling—the competing institutional interests and preferences of the various PIOs. It also allows for a degree of “clientitis” within the USG toward each offices’ respective multilateral funding partners. While the International Organizations Bureau at State is nominally charged with ensuring coherence in US PIO policy, its ability to do so is badly constrained by the reality that other parts of the government control the resource decisions—and thus wield far more influence with their respective PIO grantees.

It is no coincidence therefore that many UN turf wars and performance shortfalls reflect the same dividing lines that exist within USG. WHO’s traditionally weak performance on emergency response, for example, was tied to the fact that US (and numerous other donors’) oversight was led by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and ignored by humanitarian policy-makers. This meant greater emphasis on WHO’s normative and technical roles than its emergency management duties. And likewise, the process of addressing those emergency shortcomings post-Ebola required a concerted joint effort between HHS and USAID that would not have occurred without the political will created by the Ebola outbreak. Where two UN agencies are in conflict or are falling short—such as WFP and UNHCR over refugee feeding and cash grant programs, UNHCR’s weaknesses on protection of IDPs, or tussles between OCHA and other agencies over coordination and leadership issues—the diffusion of US governance voices means these agencies receive differing implicit or explicit messages from their respective US counterparts.

- **Inconsistent and siloed grant systems.** FFP, PRM, and OFDA each use different systems for grant-making and impose different reporting and other requirements upon grantees. At a time when the US and other donor nations have committed to streamline and align their requirements on grant recipients, it is indefensible that the USG cannot even agree to a unified system internally, much less negotiate collective changes with other donors. These inconsistencies add to the red tape required of grantees, without corresponding added value in terms of oversight and accountability. These duplicative systems also impede sensible programming. A comprehensive NGO program that serves refugees, host, and IDP populations, and includes a food or nutrition element, would require three simultaneous grant applications, each with its own timeline and reporting requirement. As a result, grantees rarely attempt to propose such interventions, and those that do encounter protracted review periods and complex implementation.

- **Artificial segmentation of funding.** The account structure of US humanitarian appropriations is segmented by program and population type, reflecting the separate historical origins of the three offices. This ensures that the topline US resource allocation toward humanitarian emergencies is predetermined based on the relative size of the IDA (International Disaster Assistance), MRA (Migration and Refugee Assistance), and FFP accounts, rather than the relative needs of refugees, non-refugees, and food insecure populations. Truly comprehensive and needs-driven budgeting spanning all humanitarian need does not happen, as it is functionally impossible under this budgetary arrangement.

Instead, the (non-food) needs of refugees and the multilateral agencies funded through PRM are determined based on the funding envelope that PRM receives. The (non-food) needs of all other populations in need are determined based on the size of the IDA account appropriation, regardless of how the urgency and depth of those needs may compare to refugees in a given year. And food needs of all populations are covered based on the FFP Title II appropriation and a relatively fixed proportion of the IDA appropriation—regardless of how those needs compare to the others. This segmentation also means that sensible programs that do not fall neatly into these categories—such as a household cash grant program to provide for the food and non-food needs of a blended refugee/non-refugee population—are extremely difficult for the USG to fund. It has also meant, historically, that food needs and refugee needs are covered by the USG at significantly higher levels than other populations and sectors.

- **IDPs and protracted displacement crises.** US engagement to support IDPs and address protracted displacement crises has suffered from an internal division of labor that leaves these issues straddling the three offices with no clear lead. Funding to support IDPs often falls short of the level provided to refugees in comparable environments. Over the course of the Syria crisis, for example, approximately 50 percent of total US funding has flowed through PRM, focused predominantly on the non-food needs of the 5.3 million refugees in neighboring countries. The non-food needs of IDPs and other conflict-affected communities inside Syria—a population totaling 13.5 million—by contrast received only about 20 percent of USG relief funding (through OFDA) over that period. In other words, the USG has provided two and a half times as much funding for Syrian refugees as for non-refugees, despite the non-refugee population in need being two and a half times larger. The coverage of food needs for refugee and non-refugee Syrians was also imbalanced, albeit less so.

This kind of heavy tilt toward refugee needs is common across complex crises. This can lead to perverse and indefensible aid prioritization. In Chad, for example, refugees, IDPs, and host communities live in close proximity and share similar needs. Yet the levels of assistance can vary widely, a concern that surfaced in both a 2016 UN peer review of the operation and more recent NGO advocacy. As a 2017 [joint NGO analysis argued](#), IDPs and host populations in places like Chad tend to be overlooked relative to refugee needs.¹⁵

Similar problems manifest on the policy and governance side. UNHCR nominally serves as the UN system's lead organization for protection of both refugees and IDPs, yet typically invests far more emphasis in its refugee obligations. This can lead to damaging shortfalls in leadership on IDP protection (an issue that current UNHCR leadership acknowledges and is working to rectify). The mismatch between UNHCR's roles and corresponding USG funding flows means that the USG has not imposed tangible consequences upon UNHCR for these shortcomings. The predominant USG resource and intellectual capacity on IDP protection sits at USAID, which cannot

¹⁵ <https://www.rescue-uk.org/sites/default/files/document/1561/lakechadsunseencrisis.pdf>

impose meaningful pressure on UNHCR because PRM controls the US relationship with, and funding to, that agency.

- **Inconsistent program priorities and technical standards.** The three offices apply different and sometimes inconsistent technical standards and program guidance to grantees. As OFDA and FFP’s work has increasingly converged in recent years, grantees have found that the two offices have applied different program guidance in overlapping sectors like nutrition, livelihoods, or household cash grant programming (ongoing reforms at USAID are working to address this). PRM in turn largely defers technical program oversight to its PIO partners rather than maintaining a robust in-house technical quality assurance team—de facto creating yet a third set of technical standards applied by the USG (PRM, for example, typically directs NGO grantees to seek technical and programmatic validation from UNHCR before PRM will agree to fund their projects).

THE WAY FORWARD: HARMONIZATION, NOT CONSOLIDATION

Most of the challenges outlined above have been well recognized since at least the Clinton administration review in the late 1990s. They are important problems—but difficult ones—and are not amenable to lowest-common-denominator consensus solutions. A shake-up is clearly needed, but it must be strategic rather than gratuitous. Another round of modest incremental reforms will change little.

Past reform discussions within the USG have struggled to get beyond a zero-sum mentality, and so have ultimately defaulted to a basic bureaucratic détente in which incoherence and duplication are tolerated as long as USAID and State each retain their habitual bureaucratic turf. Fixing these problems will inevitably mean shaking up that détente—and for that reason it may prove difficult for bold solutions to emerge organically from State and USAID. As this author experienced firsthand (and admittedly took part in), there is an instinctive bureaucratic tendency to protect one’s own patch. This dynamic is not unique to USAID and State: during the Goldwater-Nichols negotiations between Congress and the Pentagon, the Navy went so far as to set up a “war room” to fight Congress’s attempts to legislate the reforms.¹⁶ Resistance within State and USAID is unlikely to be as strong as that—but the two agencies are nonetheless unlikely to generate sweeping reforms by mutual consensus.

But a full consolidation of PRM’s assistance functions into USAID, as some have proposed, would carry substantial risks. The presence of empowered humanitarian voices within both State and USAID provides important institutional connectivity with diplomatic priorities at State (critical to addressing the root causes of most major emergencies) and development programs at USAID (vital to ensuring a link-up between humanitarian caseloads and development tools in protracted and chronic emergencies). Maintaining this connectivity is important, but so is better integrating it. Traditionally, PRM’s diplomatic priorities have found better traction within State than have USAID’s, while PRM has struggled to get USAID missions to engage on the developmental aspects of long-term refugee situations.

Ensuring a strong humanitarian voice within the State Department is particularly critical on refugee issues because refugee protection requires steady and painstaking diplomatic engagement with refugee-hosting governments. State and USAID engage with foreign governments through different channels: State through foreign ministries and USAID more typically through ministries of international cooperation or public services. US advocacy on refugee matters—like non-refoulement or granting of basic education and labor rights—is more powerful when conveyed through diplomatic channels.

¹⁶ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/reflections-looking-back-need-goldwater-nichols>

For a US administration that has justified restrictive domestic refugee policies by arguing it will focus on supporting refugees overseas, this diplomatic outreach function is particularly important. PRM's position within the State Department gives it more traction with the diplomatic corps and senior State Department officials than would be possible if refugee matters were housed at USAID. This leverage would be lost if PRM resources were shifted to USAID, leaving it as a diminished policy and refugee resettlement office. Resource control typically confers influence within the government, and PRM's sway with embassies and foreign governments would decline significantly if those counterparts understood that a different part of the government was actually cutting the checks. It could also leave PRM vulnerable to being dismantled completely, as [advisors within the White House proposed in 2017](#).¹⁷

Abruptly shifting refugee programming out of the State Department would have other downsides. It would be highly disruptive to US expertise on refugee protection and diplomacy, and to US relations with PRM's large PIO partners—likely weakening US PIO oversight in the near term. It would also disrupt the intricate ongoing process of merging the OFDA and FFP offices into a new USAID humanitarian bureau. That process (which this author helped to initiate while at USAID) will be complex and labor intensive as it is; folding in several billion dollars of additional resources, a broad new program mandate, and a cadre of (potentially disenchanting) career experts from the State Department, might well disrupt or derail it.

But the most compelling argument for leaving PRM's and USAID's core expertise and resources intact is that an abrupt interagency merger would be unlikely to optimize US humanitarian engagement. Grand government reorganizations have a mixed history in recent decades—the consolidation of agencies into DHS, for example, created a massive and unwieldy bureaucracy without greatly improving the performance of its component parts. The consolidation of the US Information Agency into the State Department was expected to enable more coherence between USIA's public diplomacy and State's traditional diplomacy. But in reality, that merger ended up marginalizing the public diplomacy mission and eventually dissolving specialized expertise that had developed within USIA over decades.

The Goldwater-Nichols precedent demonstrates that it is possible for ambitious reforms to drive dramatically improved cohesion between peer institutions within the government, without dismantling or merging them. The military reorganization that it mandated did not collapse the services together; it recognized that there is value in complementary and distinct specialization. But it mandated a range of changes to break down operational divisions and ensure unified action. These included consolidating all services' field operations under a single commander; de-linking the leaders of the services at large from direct oversight of their services' real-time combat operations; improving interoperability; sharing procurement; and requiring all senior officers to have served rotations in another service.

This same kind of functional harmonization—rather than bureaucratic consolidation—provides the most viable path to meaningful optimization of US humanitarian institutions. If the USG can significantly align and streamline its humanitarian delivery while also retaining strong and appropriately specialized humanitarian institutions within both State and USAID, that will provide the best of both worlds. Dismantling or significantly paring back either agency's responsibilities would be a complex process and likely trigger pushback both in Congress and in the stakeholder community. While congressional buy-in is vital to the durability of any anticipated reforms, limiting the amount of formal changes to authorizing legislation will make for a faster uptake of any changes.

¹⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/28/politics/refugee-bureau-state-department-dhs/index.html>

The aim of any reforms should therefore be primarily functional, not structural: reforms should focus on improving interoperability and performance rather than reorganizing interagency org charts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The remainder of this note lays out options for how functional reforms might be achieved. While it argues for leaving the basic architecture and specialized roles between USAID and State intact, some of the options presented below would significantly challenge the status quo and affect the balance of power and influence between the two agencies.

As difficult as this will be, meaningful change requires deliberately—albeit carefully—disrupting the détente that has prevailed between USAID and State’s humanitarian offices for decades. **This will take serious political will from the very top of USAID and the State Department.** The newly announced Humanitarian Assistance Steering Council may prove to be a step forward. But if left to its own devices by the political leadership, it will struggle to deliver genuine change, just like every previous attempt to better align State’s and USAID’s humanitarian efforts. **For the new steering council to deliver on the mandate in the White House’s government reform plan, it must be explicitly tasked to drive a serious and specific change management process and empowered with the high-level political backing to do so.**

- 1. Share or merge the humanitarian budget accounts.** Shared budgeting is a linchpin of the reforms proposed in this note. The preemptive budgetary division that currently exists between the humanitarian accounts impedes need-based budgeting, disincentivizes program coordination across offices, and blocks programs that do not fall neatly within any individual account’s parameters. The division between refugee aid (the MRA account), food aid (the Title II account), and everything else (the IDA account) reflects a long-outmoded way of financing and implementing humanitarian response. The US government should reform the humanitarian accounts to remove or minimize these legacy divisions between intertwined humanitarian priorities. Funding allocations across the offices should instead be driven primarily by comparative need. Over time this will foster improved inter-office program coordination, as OFDA and FFP found (somewhat painfully) when they began sharing the IDA account several years ago.

This could be achieved in several ways. The most impactful option would be to for Congress to shift all overseas program funding from MRA and Title II into the IDA account, and mandate that the offices allocate funds from this super-IDA among themselves based on a shared USAID-State annual budget planning process (PRM funding for functions like refugee admissions and migration issues could continue to reside in the MRA account). Shifting the funds into IDA would not reflect a presumption that OFDA should control the money; but rather that the IDA account’s authorities are broad enough to address the mandates of most existing MRA aid programs and Title II food programs (indeed, a large proportion of US food aid programs are already funded out of IDA).

Recognizing the practical and political challenges to such a move, a less aggressive option would be for congressional appropriators to maintain the existing roles of the accounts, but grant the administration the discretion to transfer up to one-third of the IDA and MRA accounts between PRM, OFDA, and FFP, with that amount to be allocated pending a joint budgeting and priority-setting process between USAID and State.

- 2. Develop a common needs analysis framework.** The fundamental principle of humanitarian assistance is the notion that it should be allocated based on need—a mandate reflected in long-standing US law and policy. Yet across the three offices charged with allocating US humanitarian assistance, there is no overarching framework for assessing needs consistently at either global or crisis-specific levels. Each office assesses need differently, and usually with little reference to the other offices (although OFDA and FFP are taking steps to change this among themselves under USAID’s existing reforms). The comparative depth of need among refugee, non-refugee, and food insecure populations is not formally assessed, much less factored into USG strategy and budget decisions. This disconnect is in turn mirrored within the international architecture, where UNHCR maintains that its refugee protection mandate requires a needs analysis and funding process that sits apart from the corresponding processes for all other crises, despite the often broadly similar nature of needs and response priorities.

The three offices should develop a shared needs analysis framework to assess the comparative urgency and depth of needs across all humanitarian crises. Such a framework could draw lessons from tools like the [PEPFAR data dashboard](#),¹⁸ which tracks a consistent set of priority indicators across all PEPFAR countries. It could also draw on the example of [USAID’s Famine Early Warning System program](#) (FEWSNET),¹⁹ which tracks and analyzes a wide body of data to assess real-time food insecurity and predict looming hunger crises. Such a framework could in turn be used, in conjunction with a shared humanitarian account between the offices, to verify that funding allocations are in line with relative needs.

- 3. Modernize program strategy in protracted crises.** US humanitarian funding has yet to adapt to the reality of a world in which [68.5 million people are forcibly displaced](#),²⁰ their displacement can often [endure for 10–15 years](#),²¹ and protracted displacement crises dominate the budgets and bandwidth of the humanitarian system. Nearly all US relief grants are for 12 months or less, out of step with the rhythms of protracted crises. US funding and planning for crises that spill across borders is artificially siloed between the offices. Engagement between relief and development programs remains weak, apart from some notable progress (under the rubric of resilience and disaster risk reduction programming) in mitigating slow-onset food crises and natural disasters. And program priorities for vulnerable populations vary depending on which office provides funding: PRM funds education for refugees while OFDA does not do so for IDPs; large-scale cash grant programming can be funded directly for non-refugee emergencies but is dependent in refugee emergencies on UNHCR preferences. Technical standards, and oversight of them, varies across the offices as well.

State and USAID should take substantial steps to better integrate their programming for protracted crises, in conjunction with the integration of budgets and field teams that this note proposes. Unified field teams (recommendation 7) would enable cohesive program approaches from the ground-up, developing response strategies that weigh trade-offs and set priorities in the field rather than in Washington. A shared budget account and unified grant management process (recommendation 6) would eliminate the flavor-of-money obstacles that otherwise impede creative integrated programming. These changes would collectively allow relief programming that is more directly field-driven and more consistent across different dimensions of a crisis.

18 <https://data.pepfar.net/global>

19 <http://fewsn.net/>

20 <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

21 <http://blogs.worldbank.org/dev4peace/how-many-years-do-refugees-stay-exile>

Those reforms could enable a number of overdue changes to response strategies. Support to different categories of population (refugees, IDPs, vulnerable but non-displaced, etc.) in a single setting could be harmonized based on their respective levels of need, rather than which office or PIO is responsible for them. In a place like Chad, where mixed populations of refugees, IDPs, and vulnerable host populations live among each other, US assistance tends to be robust for refugees, less robust for IDPs, and negligible for host communities. Instead, US assistance should be consistent relative to the needs of each population, taking care to avoid overtly favoring one particular category.

US assistance in protracted crises should also take a longer-term view, moving beyond one-year grant and planning cycles as quickly as possible after a crisis emerges. Within two years of a new protracted crisis, US humanitarian assistance should move to multi-year program cycles for long-term populations. The nature of programming in these contexts should also change. Rather than centering on long-term care and maintenance of refugee and IDP basic needs, US programming should prioritize interventions that enable the displaced to pursue productive livelihoods. This means shifting from a relief programming toolkit to a more developmental one, and likewise integrating displacement as a priority in US development programming and aligning with the World Bank's emerging involvement in this area. All of this will in turn require vigorous diplomatic engagement in some contexts, given that host countries are often reluctant to grant labor rights to refugees; which further underscores the importance of maintaining a close link-up between US humanitarian policy and diplomatic capacity.

4. **Unified budget planning process.** A shared funding account between the offices will necessitate a shared budget process as well. This will be an uncomfortable process for State and USAID, just as it proved uncomfortable for OFDA and FFP when they first began larger-scale sharing of the IDA account. But as OFDA and FFP eventually found, a shared budget process fosters closer planning alignment and yields improved program strategies.

Several lessons from the OFDA/FFP process could help facilitate effective inter-office budgeting:

- It is important to ground budget allocations in data and shared metrics—hence the significance of recommendation 2 on developing a common needs analysis framework. This shifts a potentially budget-contentious conversation about whose programs are more important into a data-driven conversation about comparative needs.
 - Likewise, it is important to ground budget allocations in field-level joint program planning between regional teams (hence the related importance of recommendation 7 below). This enables a process in which budget needs reflect the objective and field-driven balance of program priorities, rather than shoehorning program priorities to fit the DC budget allocations.
 - Joint discussions should start early in the budget cycle, to enable each office to gain an early understanding of the others' anticipated budget requirements. This allows more time to reconcile those during the process and thus avoid a contentious fight late in the game.
5. **Inclusive and consistent PIO oversight.** The USG must ensure evenhanded governance and oversight of its PIO partners. Leaving each agency's governance principally to a single USG office can impede a full and balanced representation of USG equities toward a partner agency, sometimes with considerable ill effects. In particular, centralizing US governance of UNHCR through PRM has

allowed UNHCR's poor performance on IDPs to persist for years. A new and more inclusive governance model, in which all USG equities are more robustly represented, is badly needed.

Shifts in USG governance of WHO following the 2014 Ebola outbreak offer useful lessons. Traditional US governance of WHO, in which HHS led and OFDA did not engage, skewed WHO toward its technical and normative roles while allowing its emergency response functions to wither. In the wake of WHO's failures in the Ebola outbreak, the National Security Council staff convened a broadly inclusive process focused on addressing WHO's emergency deficiencies. HHS actively welcomed USAID's engagement on WHO emergency reform and deferred to USAID's expertise in this subject area, while still maintaining its role as overall USG "chair" in the governance process. When emergency response matters would arise in the governing board, HHS temporarily turned over the American chair to a USAID representative to deliver the US messages. This model of an inclusive NSC-driven process for developing USG governance messages for its multilateral partners, paired with rotating the US representative in line with internal USG equities, has potential to make USG governance more objective and reduce the potential for clientitis between multilateral agencies and their primary USG funders.

The USG should also reconcile the inconsistent levels of assertiveness that its various offices apply toward PIO partner oversight—and reflect this in budget decisions. Sufficient US funding to sustain baseline PIO capacity should be maintained, but PIO funding levels should also be clearly tied to policy and programmatic accountability. USAID field teams regularly deploy their leverage as the largest single donors to their PIO partners to delve deep into the agencies' field operations and ensure field-level performance accountability. Both FFP and OFDA also maintain a robust roster of NGO grantees with programmatic capacities similar to their respective PIO partners. While there is not complete interchangeability between their PIO and NGO partners (certain functions like coordination, technical and normative leadership, and high-level host government engagement cannot realistically be covered by NGOs), there is enough that if a PIO partner is not performing, program funds can be rerouted accordingly. In the 2014 Ebola outbreak, for instance, USAID took a highly directive role toward its initial UN grants in order to address the early shortcomings by the UN system. During the 2016 Boko Haram crisis in Nigeria, amidst fears of famine, USAID cut off funding to UN programs that were performing poorly and instead routed those funds to better-positioned NGO partners.

PRM's oversight model toward its PIO partners, UNHCR in particular, does not allow for this sort of intensive engagement. While PRM's funding leverage with UNHCR exceeds that of USAID toward most of its PIO partners, PRM lacks the breadth of field presence to robustly oversee its PIO partners' activities. It also works far less with NGO partners, meaning that it lacks the option to shift program funding to an NGO partner if a PIO partner is falling short. Unifying USG humanitarian field presence would enable more consistently robust oversight at field level. But PRM should also take steps to diversify its funding between PIO and NGO partners to make it less solely reliant on PIOs for its programming.

Finally, the kind of accountability that these changes could enforce at a field level should also be reflected at a macro funding level. The US often pushes for reform within and between PIOs, but has been reluctant to threaten funding repercussions for fear that would ultimately mean less program delivery for a PIO's beneficiaries. Other donors, notably the UK's Department for International Development, have begun experimenting with the idea of delinking its PIO program funding—for field-based delivery—from its core funding support to agencies. Core support is flexible funding that covers important costs like normative and technical leadership, policy engage-

ment, and agency staffing and overhead. These are valid agency expenses but could be tied to performance reforms without directly diverting program funds from vulnerable beneficiaries.

To address this macro-level accountability gap, State (PRM and IO, which also controls some agency core support) and USAID could institute a formal process for jointly managing PIO framework agreements, and for setting levels of core support to PIOs based on a set of common management performance accountability metrics. Jointly owned PIO framework agreements would ensure greater consistency in US policy across different PIO agencies. And a joint core budget review could compare macro-level performance and reform progress across agencies and adjust core support levels accordingly. A credibly impartial multilateral aid review tool, which the UK has instituted and which has been proposed in Congress, could also help to inform these determinations. It is imperative that wherever possible, US decisions on core support adjustments be coordinated with other like-minded donors. US leverage to drive meaningful reform will be greatly magnified if other donors buy in; and likewise, a go-it-alone approach by the USG will falter if other donors ignore or even actively offset it.

6. Unify grant and reporting procedures. Inconsistent grant management across the three humanitarian offices has long been a bane of US NGO partners and has prevented more holistic and effective program strategies. The separate grant management approaches (solicitation, proposal processing, technical standards, and reporting and oversight requirements) should be consolidated across USAID and PRM into a single shared USG system for humanitarian grant management. USAID is already moving in this direction internally through the OFDA-FFP merger process; PRM should bring its procedures into alignment with this as well. Unified grant management should have several components:

- First, proposal guidance and standards should be consistent. A single proposal form and set of guidelines, including common indicators and technical standards, should be used for all grant proposals across the three offices.
- Second, programs that straddle different offices' mandates should be funded through a single award, rather than bifurcated by office across different grants. This would enable more holistic, beneficiary-centered programming and open the door to innovative integrated programming that is presently too cumbersome to pursue. It would also reduce the duplicative red tape imposed upon grantees.
- Third, program and financial reporting requirements should be unified. Presently, each office applies differing guidelines and requires reports with differing frequency. An internal review within OFDA in 2016 determined that frequent mid-project narrative reports added little value, as they typically arrive too late (45+ days beyond the reported period) to serve a meaningful real-time oversight function. OFDA pared back its program report to one mid-project report and a final report, a rhythm that should be considered as the standard across the three offices.

7. Consolidate and integrate field teams. The structural division of US humanitarian resources in Washington is mirrored at the field level, where each office maintains its own distinct field teams, each with a different staffing model and often in different locations. FFP staff typically report to the USAID mission director; OFDA staff report jointly to the ambassador and to their OFDA supervisors at DC or regional levels; and PRM refugee coordinators are embassy staff who typically sit in the political section within their embassy and maintain a line to PRM/Washington. FFP staff over-

seas are usually USAID foreign service officers; OFDA staff are predominantly personal services contractors; and PRM staff are State foreign service officers.

This is problematic on several levels. It impedes coherent planning and execution of responses, particularly when key regional staff work out of different embassies in a region. It dilutes the reach and presence of US humanitarian field representation, because the US representative in a given location will only have authority to speak for their own particular subset of USG programming. And it impedes coherent engagement with partner governments, grantees, and donor counterparts, because no single humanitarian official can speak for the totality of USG humanitarian engagement. Instead, in a place like Kenya, grantees must talk separately to each office's local representative about different facets of the same crisis.

US humanitarian field teams should be consolidated into matrixed teams jointly comprising the three offices' staff, operating within a unified local management structure. DART teams could be deployed for refugee crises as well as non-refugee crises, but integrate PRM personnel in the team leadership (this is already underway with FFP staff). Humanitarian personnel working at a regional level should co-locate in the same embassy and work in a unified team with a single management structure, reporting dually to the ambassador and to the three offices back in Washington (just as Goldwater-Nichols mandated that DoD combat operations would be managed by a single joint command structure rather than spread across the commands of each service). In countries where only a single office's humanitarian staff are present, their remit should cover all USG humanitarian funding in that location, and their accountability to the three offices should be managed accordingly.

- 8. Mandate staffing rotations—and invest in better relationships.** An important element of Goldwater-Nichols was its requirement that eligibility for a promotion to flag officer rank would be contingent upon serving at least one joint tour outside of one's own service. The intent in this was to reduce harmful division between the military services and build mutual understanding. A similar practice could be developed for US humanitarian personnel. A pipeline of staff rotations between the humanitarian offices should be established, to send mid-career professionals on 2-3-year rotations in positions in counterpart offices. A requirement could be established that going forward, eligibility for office director and deputy positions in PRM, or division chief and senior regional advisor positions within OFDA and FFP, would be contingent on at least one rotation outside of their home office.

This would be a partial solution to a larger problem: the persistent ebb and flow of the quality of relationships between the three offices. When the front office leadership of PRM, OFDA, and FFP get along well at an individual level, the working relationships improve all the way down the line. When the leaders are at loggerheads, this likewise resonates throughout their respective teams. PRM and USAID humanitarian leaders must prioritize constructive relationships with each other even on contentious or difficult issues; failure to do so will undermine not just their institutional collaboration but the very effectiveness of US humanitarian assistance.

- 9. Strengthen the USAID administrator's special coordinator role.** Delivering on the above reform proposals will be a major effort, and one that could easily become bogged down in interagency disagreements. An empowered honest broker role to drive the process forward and manage dispute resolution may be needed. One way to do this would be to strengthen the longstanding presidential designation of the USAID administrator as Special Coordinator for International Di-

saster Assistance. [Section 493 of the Foreign Assistance Act](#)²² authorizes the president to make this designation in order to “promote maximum effectiveness and coordination in responses to foreign disasters by United States agencies and between the United States and other donors.” This designation has historically been applied only to non-refugee disaster matters; however, that is not specified in the underlying legislation nor in the original presidential designation. The White House could re-issue or clarify this designation, with updated guidance that its interpretation of the role extends to all interagency humanitarian assistance. This guidance could also be reflected in the State Department’s Foreign Affairs Manual, which could be amended to reflect the special coordinator designation as applying to all USG humanitarian assistance.

This would mirror aspects of the role that Goldwater-Nichols established for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—as the senior advisor to the president on military policy and strategy matters across all services. Like the CJCS, the USAID Administrator reports to a cabinet secretary but often holds a separate seat at the table in the interagency process in order to provide distinct policy expertise. The strengthened special coordinator role could comprehensively advise the President on all aspects (refugee and non-refugee) of humanitarian policy, facilitate engagement between the humanitarian offices across State and USAID, and when needed mediate disputes between them. This would be a somewhat unorthodox arrangement, as it would involve State Department personnel falling under policy oversight from outside their own Department. However, it is not unheard of for USG special coordinators to hold a remit that extends beyond their own agency. One notable, and successful, example is the US Global AIDS Coordinator at the State Department, who oversees policy, strategy, and resource coordination under the PEPFAR program—even as most of PEPFAR’s work is carried out by USAID and the CDC.

- 10. Test reforms through country pilots.** The reforms proposed in this note would represent a significant shift in how the humanitarian offices work, and so could benefit from pilots to inform the permanent design of the changes. As an initial step toward more comprehensive reforms, the administration could, in consultation with Congress, designate a set of pilot countries or regional crises in which the US government would test joint USG humanitarian operations. These could be mixed crises like Bangladesh, Venezuela, and Syria, where forced protracted displacement, complex politics, and developmental factors collide. In these settings, the government could establish an integrated USAID-State field team with a joint budget envelope encompassing all offices’ resources and mandates. It could apply a single set of grant and reporting requirements (perhaps using a single office’s systems for simplicity’s sake), allocate funds based on a unified needs analysis, and report in a unified manner to the Humanitarian Assistance Steering Council. Lessons from this experience of applying joint-ness on a limited scale could then inform how subsequent reforms are rolled out worldwide.

²² <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/2292b>



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