Responding in Times of Crisis

When a natural disaster or conflict destroys communities, or when hunger and disease threaten to spread, people caught in the midst of these crises are concerned with survival. Helping them is at the core of what USAID’s Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) does every day, all over the world.

USAID/OFDA leads and coordinates the U.S. government’s humanitarian assistance efforts overseas. The Office responds to an average of 65 disasters in more than 50 countries every year, ensuring that aid reaches people affected by natural disasters, including earthquakes, volcanoes, and floods, as well as slow-onset crises, such as droughts and conflicts.

USAID/OFDA has approximately 430 staff worldwide, working from its Washington, D.C., headquarters and at five regional and more than 20 field offices. Its team of humanitarian professionals, policy advisors, and technical experts—including infectious disease specialists, nutritionists, logisticians, entomologists, and hydrometeorological advisors—identify the most urgent humanitarian needs immediately after disasters strike, working alongside local governments to assist tens of millions of people and save countless lives. USAID/OFDA’s strategically located warehouses in Miami, Florida; Pisa, Italy; Dubai, United Arab Emirates; and Subang, Malaysia are stocked with essential relief supplies, such as emergency shelter materials, warm blankets, water treatment systems, and hygiene kits. These critical commodities can be transported rapidly to disaster-affected areas around the globe.

USAID/OFDA also works with the international humanitarian community to give vulnerable people resources to get back on their feet and strengthen their own ability to respond to emergencies.

USAID/OFDA’s speed and flexibility contribute to the effectiveness of its response to international crises and help the Office lead the U.S. government’s efforts to provide humanitarian assistance—on behalf of the American people—in some of the world’s most dangerous places.

Fulfilling more than 50 years of its mandate to save lives, alleviate human suffering, and reduce the social and economic impact of disasters, USAID’s Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance responds to the needs of people affected by natural disasters and complex emergencies around the world. This includes Hurricanes Irma, Maria, and Matthew in the Caribbean in 2017 and 2016, the 2017 Mexico earthquake, the 2015 Nepal earthquake, the West Africa Ebola outbreak, the 2011 Japan earthquake and tsunami, as well as ongoing crises in Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, Nigeria, and Yemen.
Crisis Response and Technical Expertise

USAID/OFDA is staffed by crisis response experts with vast regional and technical knowledge who continually monitor global hazards, provide guidance, and prioritize programs for funding in the following sectors:

- Agriculture and Food Security: USAID/OFDA supports the distribution of seeds and tools, agricultural training, implementation of pest control programs, provision of veterinary medicine for livestock, and partnerships with farmers to strengthen local agricultural infrastructure.
- Natural and Technological Hazards: USAID/OFDA works closely with local communities to identify, manage, and reduce vulnerability to disasters by supporting programs such as disaster response training, hazard analysis, and early warning systems to move people out of harm’s way.
- Economic Recovery and Market Systems (ERMS): Economic recovery is vital to the longer-term rehabilitation of communities following a disaster. USAID/OFDA’s ERMS programs restore livelihoods, provide grants to support small business development, and create short-term employment opportunities.
- Health: USAID/OFDA works to address the major causes of illness and death during disasters by supporting primary care and mobile health facilities, prevention and treatment of disease, mental health services, and immunizations for children.
- Humanitarian Coordination/Information Management: USAID/OFDA supports activities that enhance international and local coordination mechanisms and strengthen needs assessments and information management to ensure the timely and effective delivery of humanitarian assistance.
- Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH): USAID/OFDA helps reduce morbidity and mortality associated with water- and sanitation-related diseases as well as poor environmental conditions. WASH interventions include latrine construction, hand-washing promotion, sanitation education, and the provision of safe drinking water.
Humanitarian Coordination and Partnerships

USAID/OFDA works strategically with international responders and other donor governments to maximize resources to save more lives. The Office taps into a vast international network of humanitarian partners through its funding of UN agencies, international and non-governmental organizations, and community organizations, as well as its engagement with donor governments, local governments, and other entities. USAID/OFDA can call on other U.S. government agencies to assist with response efforts, whenever needed.

Financials

Less than 2 percent of America’s federal budget is allocated for foreign assistance, and USAID/OFDA’s budget is a mere fraction of that. Humanitarian action can mean the difference between life and death for tens of millions of people every year. In fiscal year 2017, USAID/OFDA responded to 56 disasters in 51 countries, providing more than $2 billion in humanitarian assistance.

History of USAID/OFDA

USAID/OFDA was created in 1964 to lead and coordinate the U.S. government’s disaster response efforts overseas. Following a massive earthquake in the former Yugoslavia that killed more than 1,000 people and a volcanic eruption in Costa Rica that destroyed large parts of the country, the U.S. government determined a need for a lead agency to coordinate disaster assistance offered to foreign governments and affected people. Rooted in the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 as amended, the President designated the USAID Administrator to lead foreign disaster response for the U.S. government through USAID/OFDA.