

HPG Background Paper

**The US and the 'bilateralisation'
of humanitarian response**

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1. Introduction

The US government has historically maintained a strong bilateral role in international humanitarian action, despite being the major government donor to multilateral humanitarian agencies. In recent years, this bilateral approach has hardened, with more directed, project-based funding and the increasingly hands-on involvement of US donor agencies in the design and management of assistance. This background paper examines trends in the financing and operational modalities of US humanitarian action, and places these developments in a larger policy context.

2. Humanitarian action and US foreign policy

Throughout its history, the US has displayed a marked ambivalence towards multilateral institutions. As Forman, Lyman and Patrick (2002) have observed, the government aggressively promotes multilateral regimes that suit US interests, but is selective in its use of them, often opting instead to act unilaterally or through 'coalitions of the willing' in security, trade and environmental matters. Although the US is often instrumental in the initiation of multilateral agreements, it tends to convert to a spoiler role later, seeking special exceptions (as in the chemical and biological weapons conventions), or withdrawing from an agreement at the last moment (as with the Law of the Sea, the International Criminal Court and the Kyoto climate treaty). The US alone has the power to exercise this selective approach to multilateralism, and indeed feels duty-bound to do so, owing to what it perceives as its 'unique responsibilities to preserve global order' (Forman, Lyman and Patrick, 2002). Furthermore, there is a deep current of mistrust in the American electorate of unelected, unaccountable international institutions seemingly poised to encroach on US sovereignty. There is a strong feeling among segments of the US public and government that many of these institutions are ineffective and wasteful.

So too in humanitarian policy. The US is the major funder of multilateral organisations; it provides a quarter of UNHCR's annual budget, for instance. The government makes the full weight of its contribution and influence felt within multilateral humanitarian agencies, while increasingly working around and outside them in pursuit of its own objectives. While US funding to international humanitarian organisations has not declined in real terms, the proportion going to multilateral programmes has done so, with an increasingly greater share going to NGOs for specific locations and tasks. Within the US government's humanitarian structures, the rationale for pursuing a bilateral approach is practical, and boils down to control: the US as a donor desires accountability, transparency and a large measure of substantive and managerial oversight of the humanitarian programme. Making grants to NGO implementing partners affords the US government these things, whereas providing general funding support to multilateral organisations does not. At the same time, however, US humanitarian policy-makers appreciate the special role of the multilaterals, particularly the UN agencies, and would like to see them do a better job.

The reason why the US desires control over the humanitarian programme more keenly now than ever before can be traced to two sea changes in the humanitarian field over the past 15 years. The first concerns the position of humanitarian aid in broader US foreign policy. The second has to do with the new prominence of performance and accountability issues.

Many humanitarian practitioners point to the end of the Cold War as the beginning of a new era in humanitarian assistance (Macrae ed., 2002; von Bernuth, 2002). With the loss of a compelling security framework and geostrategic blueprint, and with it the willingness of Congress to provide resources for political action, humanitarian aid became more important as a way of engaging with crises in developing countries. During the complex emergencies of the 1990s, the US government used humanitarian assistance more readily than ever before as a foreign policy tool, a convenience that preceded, and often acted as a substitute for, more substantive political involvement. Thus, millions of dollars in aid have flowed into Sudan, but with Congress divided and administrations reluctant to deploy US power and prestige more directly, this engagement has not been backed up by diplomatic efforts to address the crisis there (Garvelink, 2002).

The second watershed occurred in the aftermath of the Rwandan crisis in 1994. Poor performance and coordination problems in the refugee centres in Goma crystallised donors' deep disillusionment with traditional humanitarian agencies, both NGOs and multilaterals. This led the US and other donors to insist on measurable results from their grant programmes, and to seek increased oversight of the work of multilateral agencies.

The new security framework emerging after 11 September seems poised to reinforce the United States' bilateral approach to aid. US humanitarian policy is likely to be increasingly intertwined with national security objectives: as a legitimising or public relations component to military actions, as in Afghanistan; as a political lever for 'hearts and minds' campaigns in key regions; and to help shore up unstable states to prevent new terrorist constituencies and staging-grounds from forming (Stoddard, 2002).

3. Bilateralisation and humanitarian structures

The US and other major donors have long looked to NGOs as an alternative to the wasteful or corrupt government programmes that consumed aid dollars in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in Africa. In 1999, the US Ambassador to Kenya pointedly announced that American aid for Africa (both development and relief) would henceforward flow mainly through NGOs rather than governments (Checge, 1999). That NGOs are now increasingly preferred over UN agencies speaks to a more politically nuanced set of factors, but many of the donors' reasons (transparency, accountability, control) are the same.

Nonetheless, there are marked differences between the US and European brands of bilateralisation. European donors,

for instance, have shown a growing willingness to pay into pooled ‘trust funds’ to cover the recurrent costs of struggling transitional governments, most recently the UNDP-established fund for the Interim Authority in Afghanistan. This multilateral mechanism within a bilateral assistance framework has generated enthusiasm among European donors, but is being given a wide berth by the US. Invoking the lessons of government-to-government cash transfers for development in the past, the US has made it clear that it will not make such cash transfers now, reasoning that simply giving money to an education ministry, for instance, does not mean improved teaching. Rather, the US government will adhere to its project-based funding approach.

In addition to reasons of broad policy, the structure of US humanitarian assistance favours a bilateral approach. The two main wings of the US government’s humanitarian architecture, the US Agency for International Development (USAID)’s Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA) and the State Department’s Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM), divide the humanitarian assistance mandate into separate spheres. One is multilateral and focused on refugee assistance, the other bilateral and aimed at all other emergency needs (including, by default, internally displaced populations, which have eclipsed refugees as the principal victims of modern complex emergencies). USAID/DCHA’s humanitarian offices, particularly the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), work primarily with and through NGOs, while the BPRM is mandated to provide general programme support to the multilateral humanitarian organisations, specifically the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).¹

Most of the flexibility in the structure lies on the bilateral side. BPRM is constrained, in the first instance, by a narrow mandate to support multilateral assistance to refugees. Second, Congress has maintained the BPRM’s budget at the same level for the past couple of years, and when it is prompted to authorise increased humanitarian emergency funds through supplemental appropriations, this is generally done

through OFDA, the bilateral funder. Finally, OFDA’s special status as the USAID entity focused on rapid response affords it greater freedom of operation, as well as a visible and action-oriented role in the field. By contrast, the BPRM’s role as the multilateral donor is more removed, less visible in the field and perceived, fairly or unfairly, as more directly in the service of US foreign policy objectives.

3.1 Funding trends

In 2000, the bilateral portion of US humanitarian contributions totalled \$1.3 billion. This was more than double the multilateral expenditure for that year.

Congress has kept the BPRM’s annual budget (the Migration and Refugee Assistance or MRA account) holding steady year to year at roughly \$700m. Of this, \$125m goes to admitting and resettling refugees in the US. A further \$60m is set aside to assist Jews emigrating to Israel from developing or ‘hardship’ countries, for example Russia or African states. The remainder, which hovers around \$500m, is slated for humanitarian assistance to international refugees. The MRA budget is augmented by funds from the Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA) account, a pot of up to \$100m authorised by the President for ‘urgent and unforeseen’ events, usually a sudden repatriation or a new emergency. Supplemental emergency funds authorised by Congress, a staple of OFDA’s programming, are relatively rare for BPRM.

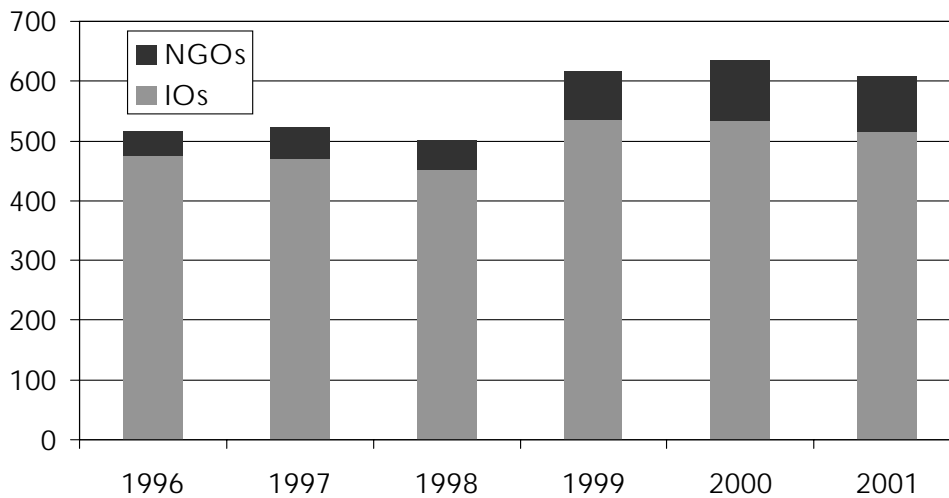
The BPRM’s contribution to UNHCR varies from year to year, but generally supplies 20–25% of the agency’s annual budget. Because UNHCR is funded (and funds) by region, donors may earmark different amounts to different regions. For instance, the BPRM has directed more of the US contribution to Africa, having determined by its own calculations (and with rumoured prodding from Congress) that UNHCR was under-funding the region. Currently, the US government funds 30% of UNHCR’s Africa programmes. After the ‘big four’ multilaterals, the BPRM can direct the remainder of its funding to other international organisations, such as OCHA, UNICEF or WHO, and to

Table 1: US government multilateral disbursements for 2000 (US\$)

Agency	Migration and refugees	Emergency food aid
UNICEF	20,844,000	–
UNRWA	97,300,000	–
WFP	23,944,000	87,396,000
UNHCR	240,160,000	–
OCHA	3,206,000	–
WHO	4,709,000	–
PAHO	506,000	–
IOM	37,785,000	–
Total multilateral	428,454,000	87,396,000
Bilateral (through BPRM)	515,850,000	259,847,000

Source: USAID Bureau for Policy and Program Coordination

Figure 1: BPRM funding to international organisations and NGOs (US\$m)



NGOs. The BPRM typically funds NGOs that are already working under implementing partnerships with UN agencies, but it has also funded stand-alone projects.

Although its contributions to international organisations have gone up in absolute terms, the proportion of the BPRM’s funding to these agencies relative to NGOs has declined in recent years, as shown in Figure 1 overleaf. In 1997, Julia Taft took the chief position at the BPRM, direct from her role as president of the NGO consortium InterAction. From the beginning of her tenure, Taft advocated for increased operational relationships with NGOs, arguing that their flexibility and specificity compensated for the deficiencies of multilateral organisations. Over the three years of Taft’s leadership, there was a jump in NGO funding by the BPRM.

For OFDA, funding fluctuates with the occurrence of new emergencies, for which Congress allocates supplemental funding as it deems necessary. Thus, Congress may increase, even double, the humanitarian funding authorised through OFDA in any given year. During the 1990s, OFDA awarded an average of around \$153m per year, excluding 1999, when the Kosovo emergency ballooned the OFDA budget to \$250m. The percentage going through NGOs (US-based, international and indigenous) has risen along with the total volume of funds, from roughly 60% in the 1980s to between 70% and 80% in the 1990s. The proliferation of NGOs since the late 1980s has offered a wider range of partnering options, while at the same time allowing OFDA to cultivate longstanding and predictable working relationships with a handful of key implementers.

In another funding trend of a starkly bilateral nature, in 1999 the US government began reporting its expenditures related to resettling refugees in the US as international humanitarian assistance. In 2000, the US spent \$519m within its own borders, on transport, housing and food vouchers

for incoming refugees. This surpassed by almost \$100m the total the US provided to multilateral humanitarian agencies that year, and accounted for 30% of its total humanitarian aid (bilateral and multilateral combined).

3.2 Policy trends: BPRM

At the BPRM, policy-makers express a sense of both abiding obligation and rising frustration with the international organisations they support. Among the donor nations that make up UNHCR’s governing Executive Committee (ExCom), the US provides a full quarter of the agency’s annual budget, and has been the most insistent and consistent in calling for reform to allow increased donor/member governance. Backed to varying degrees by the other donor nations, the US is demanding greater transparency and accountability in budgetary matters, and for a larger say for donors in UNHCR’s programme design and planning. UNHCR is funded almost completely (98%) through voluntary contributions. Thanks in part to donor dissatisfaction, the agency has in recent years faced budgetary shortfalls of up to about 10–15% a year. In ExCom negotiations at UNHCR, and in its dealings with other international organisations, the US government takes the position that it is not merely a donor, but also a member of the organisation. As such, it has a responsibility to ensure good governance and sound policy. According to BPRM officials, change has been slow, and UNHCR has frequently resisted what it sees as US micro-management.

Paradoxically, despite providing the lion’s share of funding, the BPRM has less leverage over international organisations than other donors. Because the BPRM is the only US government entity explicitly mandated to fund international organisations, and because it is in the BPRM’s interest that US contributions remain large, its hands are effectively tied,

Table 2: US bilateral humanitarian aid in 2000 as reported to OECD/DAC (US\$ '000s)

USAID international disaster assistance	278,218
State Migration & Refugees	13,800
DoD Humanitarian Assistance	84,623
State International Disaster Assistance	866
DoD Contingency Costs Flood Relief in Mozambique & Venezuela	22,867
State Migration & Refugees Bilateral	246,047
Domestic Refugee Costs	383,000
Domestic Refugee Costs (Food Stamps)	59,014
Domestic Refugee Costs R&P	76,920
USAID Title II Food for Peace	69,231
USAID Title II Food for Peace	51,848
Total	1,286.45m

Source: USAID Bureau for Policy and Program Coordination

whereas other donors have more scope to shift their funding to NGOs. Moreover, withholding or reducing the US government's 25% contribution in order to 'teach the UN bureaucrats a lesson' would seriously damage the humanitarian effort (Hunter, 2002). Instead, the US has negotiated a framework agreement with UNHCR on areas for improvement, and has also developed *ad hoc* mechanisms to allow for greater participation. BPRM has helped to establish country-level workshops with donors, UNHCR and NGOs to identify basic needs and assistance objectives. In the case of ICRC and those UN agencies that do not have formal governing bodies, the US has been instrumental in creating informal donor support groups. The 'Friends of OCHA' is one such *ad hoc* advisory mechanism, on which the BPRM represents US interests. The group meets without formal terms of reference, but, according to OCHA staff, 'takes great interest in our priorities and work plans'. For its part, OCHA endeavours to be as forthcoming and transparent as possible.

When the BPRM funds NGOs, this is for specific, project-based activities, and the requirements and expectations are much more detailed, akin to OFDA's cooperative agreements. Also like OFDA, and unlike most European donors, the BPRM will fund NGOs regardless of their nationality (though US-based NGOs generally comprise the majority of bilateral grantees).

3.3 OFDA and the power of the known

Historically, OFDA has seen itself as the arm of the US government that funds NGOs for humanitarian operations. OFDA utilises the following three funding mechanisms:

- grants, which are the primary vehicle for implementing partnerships with NGOs, UN agencies and international organisations in emergency situations;
- contracts, which are intended primarily for private sector or highly specialised technical actors in the procurement of specific good and services; and
- cooperative agreements, which fall somewhere between

grants and contracts (and are a preferred funding vehicle of USAID).

Cooperative agreements entail 'substantial involvement' (USAID, 2002) between the donor and the recipient during the lifespan of the project, including USAID approval of key project staff. It is more suited to longer-term projects such as would fit in to a given USAID country strategy. Because OFDA deals mainly in short-term (under 12 months' duration) emergency relief projects, and generally relies on experienced NGOs in the field to assess needs and determine appropriate interventions, OFDA disburses roughly 90% of its funding in the form of grants. Exceptions have occurred when an emergency situation transitions to a recovery effort (for example, post-Dayton Bosnia), when OFDA turns to longer-term cooperative agreement vehicles (discussed below). However, even in using the grant modality, OFDA has involved itself more closely in the conceptualisation and management of projects by structuring its grant proposal guidelines for NGOs to elicit a very specific type of product.

When confronted with its poor performance in Goma, the chastened NGO community embarked on a course of collective soul searching, and emerged with the Sphere project, which set forth a 'Humanitarian Charter' for relief agencies and defined a set of 'Minimum Standards' or best practices in humanitarian response (Sphere, 1998). By contrast, the UN agencies gave the impression of adopting a defensive posture, deflecting blame back to the member states, and denying that things were seriously amiss within their organisations (International Peacekeeping News, 1996). This distinction was not lost on OFDA, which had strongly supported the standardisation and professionalisation embodied in the Sphere project, and was itself undergoing a policy and performance reform process.

During the Clinton administration, an initiative was launched to improve performance and efficiency at all levels of government, emphasising results-based management (RBM). RBM entails setting specific objectives and performance targets, identifying indicators to measure progress, and establishing systems to monitor and evaluate results (US

Government Performance and Results Act 1993). USAID built the RBM logical framework into its reengineering process in the mid-1990s, and OFDA modelled it in its revised guidelines for grant proposals and reports (USAID, 1996). NGOs were now required to mould their project objectives in a way that would generate quantifiable results, reflecting the fact that, ultimately, Congress wanted to know 'how many people did you feed?'. A further revision of the grant guidelines in 1998 formally incorporated the findings of the Sphere Project and its minimum standards for humanitarian relief operations. Thus, domestic frustrations with US government inefficiency (that often highlighted the foreign aid bureaucracy as a showcase for waste) combined with the hard lessons of Goma to spur the US into aggressively promoting management-for-results. This brings the donor into a more direct management position *vis-à-vis* the grantee and the project.

Unlike the career development officers at USAID, OFDA's personnel are relatively young, and staff turnover is frequent; only a small minority have five years or more with the agency. Perhaps partially as a result of its desire for consistency, OFDA is known to favour implementing partners with which it has developed longstanding relationships and faith in their capabilities in emergency situations. These NGOs have likewise become experts at OFDA's processes and proclivities, and know what it expects of them. As one OFDA staff member put it, 'You cannot underestimate the power of the known in granting' (Menghetti, 2002). By contrast, the UN agencies, to whom OFDA grants a smaller percentage of its funds (typically around 15%), tend to offer much more resistance to donor scrutiny and conditions on performance.

3.4 Flying the flag: jockeying for donor visibility

A ubiquitous and often controversial image in emergency situations has been the 'USA' logo, required by government to be placed on US-donated aid commodities. While the US is not the only donor government to engage in competitive branding, it tends to be the most visible, doubtless because of the enormous amounts of surplus food that it contributes to relief efforts. In the age of CNN, the labels can become a double-edged sword, as when donated goods show up in the marketplace or in the hands of belligerents. But they are nonetheless a powerful reminder of how seriously governments take the public face of their humanitarian efforts. Although slightly embarrassed OFDA staff members have been known to make discretionary exceptions to the branding rule, it remains a matter of exacting federal regulations. (By way of example, if a commodity is donated 50:50 by OFDA and ECHO, the regulations stipulate that the logos must be of equal size.)

4. The US donor presence in the field

Since the first precursor of the Disaster Assessment and Response Teams (DARTs) was fielded in 1985 in response to an earthquake in Mexico City, USAID's humanitarian

bureau, and OFDA in particular, have dramatically increased their ground presence and direct involvement in programming. The DARTs were designed to improve information and communication systems between the US government and its grantees, and to speed up project reviews and approvals for more timely humanitarian response efforts. From the NGO perspective, this represented a major change in the funding relationship and programming process. Whereas once the NGOs used to come to OFDA with funding requests, now just as often the NGO will be approached by DART to undertake a specific project. A great deal more communication and iteration occurs in project design in the field, with the end result inevitably reflecting the donor's agenda and priorities, as well as the agency's capacities and goals.

NGOs have both positive and negative reactions to the DART phenomenon. Most admit to seeing much-needed improvements in review and approval times, and shorter intervals between project approvals and the disbursement of funds. Some also genuinely appreciate close communication and consultation during the design and implementation of projects, citing projects that have been improved thanks to OFDA's input. Still others voice concern that the resulting project is no longer the agency's own, forfeiting its status as an independent humanitarian actor.

The length of time a DART is on the ground affects how closely it attempts to control the projects of its implementing partners. A report commissioned by USAID reviewing OFDA's performance in the Former Yugoslavia from 1991–96 (the longest-running DART mission to date) observed that it was precisely when the DART became experienced in the region that its effectiveness began to suffer (Fawcett and Tanner, 2002). Having started out as a free-spending donor encouraging NGOs to come forward with innovative approaches to humanitarian challenges, post-Dayton the DART moved into cooperative agreement funding for a large-scale shelter project, for which the NGOs tailored their programmes and placed bids like any other government contractors.

Since 1993 the DART had steadily grown in experience and confidence, both as a funder of NGO programs and as a reporter for the US government. It was well-established, well-connected, and well thought of. Yet, and here lies the paradox, at the end of 1995 the DART had run its course in Bosnia. As a donor, it no longer had the humility to [encourage and make use of] NGO creativity, or even the ability to do so: indeed the DART had done much to stifle whatever creativity was left in the NGO community with large amounts of money and the increasing tendency to be directive (Fawcett and Tanner, 2002).

OFDA's 1999 annual report stated that the demands of modern complex emergencies have compelled the agency to assume multiple roles: 'in any humanitarian disaster [OFDA] may find itself functioning as a donor, a coordinator, and even an implementer of disaster response' (USAID, 1999). In Kosovo in particular, OFDA found itself working hand in hand with the agencies to establish supply lines and depots, and with military and private sector actors. OFDA

has taken the reins of coordination reluctantly at times, preferring that the UN agencies fulfill their expected role in this regard, and is willing to work vigorously behind the scenes to see that they do so, as in Kosovo and Macedonia in 1999 (Menghetti, 2002).

OFDA's DART efforts are facilitated by large regional offices in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, whose staff members travel to emergency areas throughout their region. Their purpose is to increase and improve OFDA's coordination with the USAID missions in those countries, ensure that humanitarian preparedness planning is integrated into USAID country plans and increase local hiring for better consistency in programming. On-the-ground activities have expanded sufficiently that, in 1999, OFDA established a Response Management Team (RMT) in Washington 'to provide sustained support for the increased number, size, and duration of USAID/DARTs', and to expedite the decision-making processes in Washington (USAID, 1999). In 2000, OFDA deployed assessment teams and technical staff in 13 different emergencies around the world.

Although not quite as visible, the BPRM has established a significant field presence of its own. There are 23 refugee coordinators in posts around the world, attached to US embassies. In this way, the BPRM argues that it is able to monitor the work of international organisations, a task that has taken on new urgency for the bureau in light of the scandals involving the sexual exploitation of crisis victims by humanitarian and peacekeeping personnel. In its bilateral granting, the BPRM takes a page from OFDA's book, favouring those NGOs 'with an established presence in the region and a proven track record' (USG/PRM, 2002).

5. Aid and the US military

More than any other major donor, the US humanitarian offices are required to forge close working relationships, in headquarters and in the field, with the nation's military forces. The growing 'securitisation' of US humanitarian assistance has caused a great deal of discomfort in the UN and the rest of the international humanitarian community, particularly NGOs, which find it ever more difficult to project an image of neutrality as the lines between soldier and aid provider become blurred.

Operation Provide Comfort, launched in 1991 to assist Kurdish refugees fleeing Iraq, signalled a turning-point in the US military's involvement in humanitarian efforts. Military personnel were involved, not simply in transporting commodities or providing security for aid routes, but in all aspects of the planning and operations of humanitarian delivery. Much of what was delivered was military food and non-food supplies that were on hand to support the Gulf War effort. In complex emergencies such as Somalia, Kosovo and now Afghanistan, the US has functioned as both aid provider and party to the conflict. While refusing to promote an extension of the international force beyond Kabul, small US military teams – armed but not uniformed – are taking on small-scale relief projects for which they possess no unique capacity or comparative advantage.

OFDA has emerged as the natural interlocutor between the US military and the rest of the humanitarian community in the field and in Washington. Indeed, OFDA has expressly taken on the role of interfacing with the military, and attempting to bring the humanitarian and the military planning processes together (Williams, 2000). Both OFDA and the DCHA maintain direct lines of communication with the US military, both in the Pentagon and, for matters pertaining Afghanistan, at Central Command in Tampa, Florida. By way of example, the bureau, after many attempts, was able to communicate to the military that the humanitarian actors in Afghanistan were deeply concerned at the plan for US soldiers to deliver relief assistance wearing civilian clothes. The military agreed to have soldiers wear identifying badges.

6. USAID and NGOs: mutual dependence

The relationship between USAID/OFDA and its international NGO partners is one of pronounced interdependence.² Not only does OFDA programme over 70% of its funding through NGOs, but the major organisational actors in American (and global) humanitarian assistance derive between 40% and 60% of their funding from this single donor (USAID, 2000). Neither donor nor grantee is comfortable in admitting the extent of this dependence, and the relationship is marked by a constant push and pull and public arguments, with each side seeking to maintain a measure of control and independence. For the most part, NGOs have not let the funding relationship stifle their objections to administration and USAID policies, and indeed have won the day on more than one occasion (Forman and Stoddard, 2002; Stoddard, 2002). Nevertheless, USAID and Congress placed limitations on how much funding NGOs may appropriately obtain from the US government. The so-called 'privateness requirement', under which a minimum of 20% of an NGO's budget must be made up by non-government cash, is strictly enforced (and many NGOs struggle to meet it).

6.1 The informational role of NGOs

NGOs not only serve as the primary vehicle for US bilateral humanitarian assistance, but also exert a palpable influence on the government's humanitarian policy through formal and informal channels. In so doing they reinforce its bilateral orientation. In perhaps their most important informal consultative function, NGOs in the field provide a key source of on-the-ground information to donor agencies. This information influences humanitarian policy and broader foreign policy decisions.

A principal function of DART is to crosscheck information between the UN, NGOs and embassy personnel. But when security conditions deteriorate, DART members are subject to the same safety restrictions as other government employees. These restrictions have, in case after case, limited their movements to the capital city, embassy compound or even the neighbouring country. In these situations, NGOs provide the major

source of information to the government on humanitarian conditions and political developments.

The informational role of NGOs can become enormous, sometimes providing the sole basis for humanitarian planning in Washington. In Afghanistan before the current relief effort, there had been only two short OFDA visits in as many years. When in November concerns surfaced about the nutritional situation, the solitary piece of documented information came from a survey undertaken by Save the Children/CDC, which identified serious nutritional deficiencies in the north-west (Aseefa, 2001). This information, according to USAID officials, influenced OFDA planning very heavily, and was passed on to the military (where it was likely to have been inadvertently responsible for controversial food drops). At the time of writing, US government humanitarian officials were still confined to Islamabad and Kabul.

BPRM officers also acknowledge the crucial informational role played by NGOs. As the bureau's organisational structure is flat, the Assistant Secretary generally sees the information gleaned from NGOs, and uses it for planning and policy decisions. Moreover, BPRM's Assistant Secretary and the Assistant Secretaries of the Regional Bureaus of the State Department consult closely and regularly on information and new developments, their impact on the region and what the US policy position should be. BPRM staff also note that Secretary of State Colin Powell professes particular interest in humanitarian matters and wants to be assured that BPRM is on top of the situation. The Secretary's military background generally means that the military will be present at the planning table, thus effectively bringing together the major arms of US foreign policy around information provided by NGOs.

Although crucial, the informational relationship with NGOs remains almost completely informal. The US rarely commissions or develops an informational basis for evolving policy decisions, with the exception of mechanisms like the Famine Early Warning System (FEWS), which provide only very broad projections.

7. The accountability question

How does accountability fare in the increasing proximity of the donor to the humanitarian project? Officials in OFDA and the BPRM have a strong sense of what they need from their grantees in terms of accountability, but are less clear as to their own accountability. In the case of DCHA/OFDA, the bureau arguably has many masters. First, it must continually justify its existence to a hostile Congress through annual reports and the 'success stories' of its NGO projects. In addition, OFDA is audited and held to account by numerous government offices, including the General Accounting Office, the Office of Procurement and the General Counsel. One OFDA staffer remarked on how OFDA, with its relatively tiny percentage of the national budget, is subject to the same onerous regulations and codes as the much larger Department of Transportation. However, OFDA's accountability to these offices mainly concerns

conforming to particular financial and operational regulations; its accountability to Congress, and by extension the American public, is so broad and diffuse that the annual reports risk appearing as simply an eye-glazing array of numbers, if indeed they are even read by any member of Congress, which OFDA concedes is unlikely.

Arguably, the NGO that works with the donor to design a project and remains in close contact throughout its implementation has less of an accountability burden. The closer relationship of the donor to the grantee turns the project into something of a joint effort, and as the donor has a greater investment in the project, so it has a greater incentive to paper over less effective programmes, as well as a disincentive to fund programmes that are possibly more innovative, but whose results cannot be easily quantified.

The accountability issue merits further examination. This should include the question of how the aid recipients themselves factor into the equation, a point on which the donors have been mostly silent.

8. Harnessing donor power

Although it may not be particularly noticeable to the people in government who perform the daily work of US humanitarian assistance, changes in funding and policy mechanisms mean that the US has become less of a sponsor and more of an owner-operator of the US humanitarian programme. This paper attributes this movement to a number of factors:

- a tradition of selective multilateralism in foreign policy and bilateralism in giving;
- the increased importance of humanitarian assistance in foreign policy after the 1980s; and
- the move towards results-based performance monitoring and the increasing desire for accountability and managerial control over assistance efforts.

The evidence seems to indicate that bilateralisation is increasing, and will represent the new humanitarian reality for at least the near term. The small, concentrated group of major humanitarian donors presents at once the biggest obstacle and the greatest hope for improvement in humanitarian response. As the pivotal actors in the humanitarian system, these donors can have an immediate positive impact on humanitarian response through readily identifiable financing and programmatic mechanisms, particularly in preparedness and coordination. So far, they have only flirted with this.

Numerous efforts have been made to improve agency coordination in the field and in headquarters, but coordination among donors has been a secondary consideration. Despite its relative weight in the humanitarian system, the US does not see its role as stepping in to lead the coordination of donors. Regular exchanges now take place in the field and at headquarters, but it was only recently that OFDA personnel even knew the names of their ECHO counterparts. With humanitarian resources now largely

concentrated among half a dozen 'mega-donors', including the US, ECHO, the Netherlands and the UK, this should be easy to remedy. With US policy-makers now speaking of a 'widening philosophical gulf' (Garvelink, 2002) between the US and Europe on multilateral funding mechanisms and approaches to humanitarian policy, it should be given priority.

Endnotes

¹The fourth major beneficiary of BPRM funds, though less frequently mentioned, is the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees. Since 1992, the World Food Programme (WFP) has also received BPRM funds through a less formal memorandum of understanding.

² USAID calls international NGOs private voluntary organisations (PVOs) to distinguish them from indigenous non-government and community-based organisations.

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Jean Hacken, Chief, Program Support Division, OFDA, Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, USAID

Douglas Hunter, Director, Office of Multilateral Coordination and External Relations, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, Department of State

Paula Lynch, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, Department of State

Anita Menghetti, Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, USAID

Mary Q. Newton, Office of Private and Voluntary Cooperation, USAID

Rudolph von Bernuth, Associate Vice-President for Humanitarian Response, Save the Children, Former Senior-Vice President for Program, CARE