ADVANCING PEACEFUL, DEMOCRATIC CHANGE

OFFICE OF TRANSITION INITIATIVES

MAY 1999

USAID

BUREAU FOR HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE
U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Cover Photo: Before the March 1997 elections in Liberia, warlords and their faction fighters controlled access to information in rural areas of Liberia. Moreover, the lack of electricity made it difficult or impossible for many Liberians to access accurate and current elections news and other programming. The cover photo shows Liberians holding up one of the wind-up, batteryless radio sets delivered by an OTI-funded NGO as part of an effort to disseminate key voter information through new independent radio programs. (Photo Source: Search for Common Ground)

A CHANGING WORLD

The course of global events since the waning of the Cold War has challenged traditional notions of foreign assistance. Development resources were once channeled without reference to the internal politics of a country, concentrating instead on improving standards of living through projects in agricultural production, infrastructure improvement, education, health, and microenterprise. It has become increasingly clear that this strategy is no longer viable.

The 1990s brought a resurgence of ethnic and religious conflict and a growing number of armed political movements, as well as famines and natural disasters of alarming magnitude. A new term—complex humanitarian emergency—was coined to capture the political and "man-made" components of the ensuing humanitarian crises. A decade ago, response to complex emergencies absorbed only 10% of U.S. disaster assistance funding. Today, that amount has skyrocketed to 90%.

As the number of complex emergencies has multiplied, the gap between humanitarian assistance and development assistance has become glaringly evident. Traditional humanitarian assistance focuses on meeting immediate survival needs: food, shelter, and health. Traditional development assistance takes a longer-term approach to meeting human needs by fostering economic and social development—a process that can take many years. Both approaches lack the ability to respond quickly and effectively to the critical needs of countries undergoing politically charged transitions.

Unresolved political crises can explode, generating huge costs in human lives and obliterating years of economic and social development. Bosnia, Liberia, and Rwanda tragically illustrate the potential enormity of the consequences: brutal ethnic wars, years of civil conflict, even the ultimate horror of genocide. In other countries, as in Indonesia and Nigeria, moments of crisis can give birth to rare opportunities for accelerating movement toward genuine democracy.

The leadership of the United States in response to political crises can make a crucial difference. Transition assistance can potentially pay large dividends by mitigating the need for costly military operations, peacekeeping efforts, and emergency humanitarian relief. It can help countries begin or maintain a strategy of sustainable development that will enable them to become stronger trading partners and allies. And, it enhances global security by helping to enlarge the community of peaceful, stable nations.

RECENT TRENDS IN WORLD PEACE AND SECURITY

- There were 25 major armed conflicts in 1997.
- Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, over 4 million people have been killed in conflicts—over three quarters of them civilians.
- Since the mid-1980's, the number of man-made emergencies requiring a U.S. government response has doubled. Since the Gulf War, the U.S. has mounted 27 military operations, most in response to ethnic conflicts or the collapse of nation states.
- Between 1994 and 1997, the U.S. government expended $2.8 billion in mounting responses to complex emergencies.
- In 1997, positive developments in peace and security included the signing of a peace accord in Guatemala that ended a 30-year civil war, and reinstatement of a ceasefire in Northern Ireland, which set the stage for the historic peace agreement of 1998.

A NEW RESPONSE

In 1994, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) created a new tool for responding to the challenges of the post-Cold War era: the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI). Its mandate is to advance peaceful, democratic change in conflict-prone countries of strategic importance and humanitarian concern to the United States.

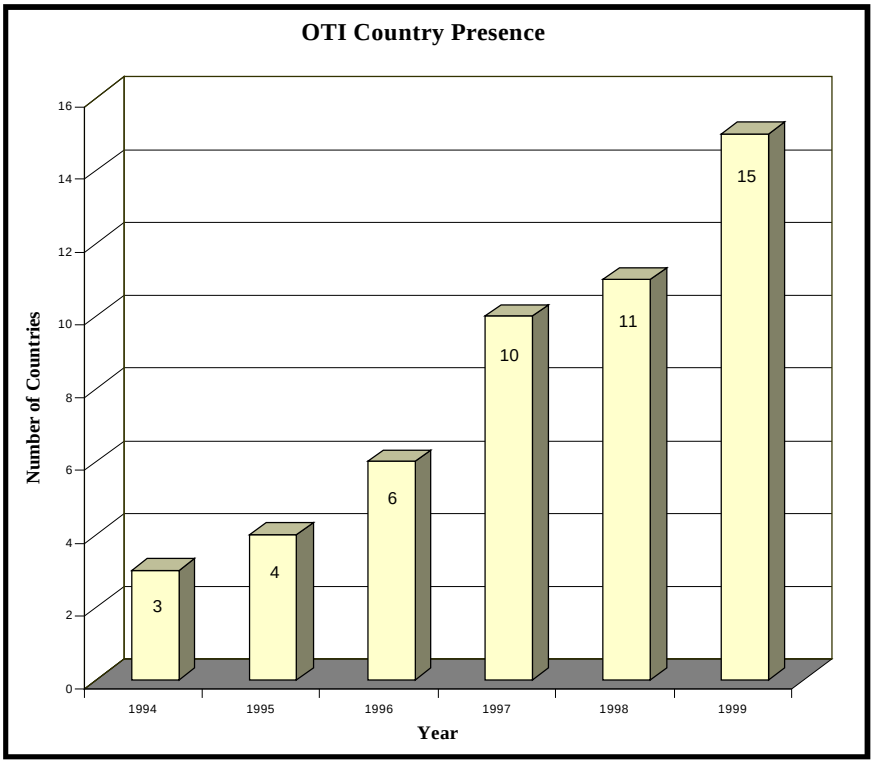
OTI moves quickly to take advantage of critical windows of opportunity in conflict-ridden countries. Its interventions are tied to pivotal transition events such as ceasefires, negotiation of peace accords, the advent of progressive leadership, and economic or humanitarian crises that threaten a state 's stability. OTI provides direct assistance to local change agents, supporting people and organizations in their efforts to achieve enduring economic, social, and political progress —and to participate more fully in the governance of their communities and countries.

An "operational donor," OTI possesses special programming flexibility. It puts staff on the ground swiftly to identify and act on what are often fleeting transitional opportunities. There are no set responses. Near-term, high-impact projects that increase momentum for peace, reconciliation, and reconstruction are identified and implemented. Strategies are tailored to meet the unique needs of each transition country. Typically, they are tested on a small scale and are applied more broadly when it is clear that high impact is being achieved. Changing conditions are quickly reflected in new or modified strategies.

A VITAL TOOL OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

"OTI has shown it is a lean, flexible operation capable of targeting the key bottlenecks that prevent post-crisis societies from moving forward."

USAID Administrator
J. Brian Atwood
May 27, 1997



In December 1997, at the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Clinton Administration announced its intention to expand OTI's efforts over the next two years.

OTI's choices and resource allocations reflect U.S. foreign policy priorities. In years past, its focus countries included Haiti, Angola, and Bosnia. Recently, more of its resources have been directed to Indonesia, Nigeria, and Kosovo. OTI's goal is to serve as a catalyst during the critical two-year period when countries are most vulnerable to renewed conflict or instability. In some cases, assistance may be provided for longer periods of time because of the exceptional complexity and difficulty of the transitional challenges, as in Rwanda, or additionally because OTI programs are tied to a broader U.S. government effort, as in Bosnia.

While OTI has focused largely on "post-conflict societies," its mandate is evolving. Providing transition assistance *before* politically-charged events lead to state implosion or violent conflict makes good sense. The difficulty of embarking on a path of peaceful change and sustainable development jumps a quantum level when a nation must first recover from the ravages of conflict. More importantly, preventing outbreaks of violence can save thousands, sometimes even millions, of lives.

OTI's transitional assistance can include:

- The training of ex-combatants for reintegration into a society's peace-time work force;
- Community development and political decentralization programs that encourage political participation at the local level;
- The clearing of land mines and support for mine awareness programs;
- Support for alternative media and public information campaigns to encourage peace and reconciliation;
- The training of law enforcement officials and judges;
- Electoral assistance and other support for nascent political systems;
- Technical assistance to new governments, both at the national and local level;
- Building the capacity of civil society organizations to effectively engage government officials in discussions and dialogues;
- Human rights support, such as funding human rights education and monitors; and,
- Support to international tribunals or local commissions examining war crimes.

HIGH-LEVEL ATTENTION

After visits to OTI-funded project sites in Guatemala and the Former Yugoslavia, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright observed, "OTI highlights the need to act flexibly when a conflict ends."

In Rwanda, President Bill Clinton met with women survivors of the genocide who are beneficiaries of OTI-funded projects.

In Arusha, Tanzania—site of the Rwanda War Crimes Tribunal—First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton gave a radio address to Rwandans that was made possible by an OTI grantee.

Congressional visits to OTI programs in Bosnia, Guatemala, Haiti, Indonesia and Rwanda have generated bi-partisan support for practical, timely, and politically-sensitive post-crisis initiatives.

The tangible results of OTI programs have sparked a growing demand for its services. In 1997 the Department of State and the National Security Council asked OTI to assess the potential for transition assistance to several high-priority countries, including Northern Ireland and West Bank and Gaza. USAID missions and other USAID offices have drawn on OTI's expertise and operational capacities in countries around the world, including Georgia, the Philippines, Sudan, and Honduras.

FAST, FLEXIBLE, AND INNOVATIVE TRANSITION ASSISTANCE

OTI is uniquely equipped for responding to transitional opportunities. Rapid funding mechanisms, a culture of innovation, staff who combine strong political analysis skills with experience in humanitarian crises, and key lessons learned from its experience in conflict-prone countries have helped OTI become a valuable instrument advancing the U.S. government's goals.

OTI's efforts have helped empower returning refugee families that fled Rwanda after the 1994 genocide. *(Photo Source: UNHCR / P. Moumtzis)*

Rapid Funding Mechanisms Allow Fast, Flexible Response

Special funding mechanisms contribute significantly to OTI's ability to respond quickly and flexibly. OTI draws from USAID's International Disaster Assistance account, and thus is able to react quickly to highly time-sensitive transition opportunities. OTI follows standard USAID procurement procedures for routine matters, but uses expedited procedures when rapid response is required.

In September 1998, OTI created an implementing mechanism known as SWIFT (Support Which Implements Fast Transitions) to speedily establish a presence for new country programs. SWIFT partners can provide communications, security, administrative and logistic support for rapid assessments; establish or enhance operational field offices; hire and manage local and expatriate personnel; set up regional operations; advise on program interventions; and implement small grants programs. It is presently in use in Indonesia, Nigeria and the Philippines. While OTI manages the contract, SWIFT services can be used by any USAID office or mission, and even by other government agencies and donors.

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A Culture of Innovation

Countries often reach transitional crossroads because of long-standing weaknesses in their political systems. Moving beyond the status quo requires advancing new approaches, talent, and societal attitudes. So transition assistance must also move beyond the "tried and true" modes of humanitarian response or development assistance.

Embracing innovation and experimentation, OTI brings a distinctive optic to transition programs. The very nature of transitions involves both risk and possibility—there are no blueprints for success. OTI invents creative and practical responses to unprecedented challenges and pursues new solutions for perennial problems:

- In Rwanda, the genocide left a legacy of ethnic suspicion, a citizenry deeply distrustful of government, and a significantly larger number of households headed by single women. OTI forged an unusual partnership with the Rwandan Ministry of Gender and Family to help women play new leadership roles in local governance. This project is a powerful force for reconciliation at the community level. It is also helping to increase Rwandans' confidence in participatory decision-making processes and is strengthening the capacity of the ministry.

- In the Balkans, hardline nationalist sentiments continued to thrive after signing of the Dayton Peace Accords. OTI launched a ground-breaking media campaign that directly challenges demagoguery and nationalist propaganda. The campaign seeks to generate policy debate and shift public opinion.

- Whether a transition involves going from war to peace or a transfer of political power, spoilers can radically undermine the process. Too often, this issue is ignored and a stable peace proves elusive. In the Philippines and Guatemala, OTI helped reinforce peace agreements by working to create new economic opportunities for ex-combatants who might have otherwise become spoilers.

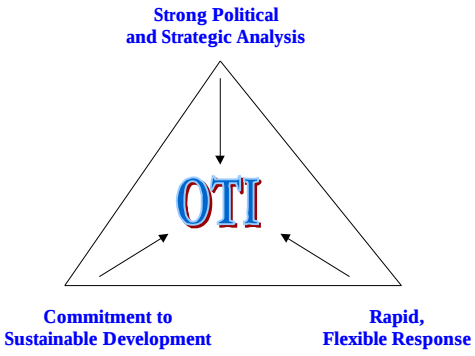
"OTI has been very successful in its efforts to build peace and democracy in [Bosnia]. Its proactive policies have reached into many areas where no other international humanitarian organization has dared to venture."

Maureen Taylor, Ph.D.
Rutgers University
April 1999

These examples illustrate OTI 's agility in formulating responses to transitional challenges. It is constantly researching and developing new approaches to enhance its effectiveness. OTI is currently exploring new program areas in improving civil-military relations and anti-corruption.

Intellectual Capital for Transitions

Building peace and promoting democracy in transition environments requires a unique set of skills. OTI 's successes are due in large part to its staff, who combine expertise in political and strategic analysis with an understanding of the need for rapid response and a commitment to sustainable development. A diversity of backgrounds – from humanitarian response to democracy and governance programming – and experience in a broad range of conflict-prone countries ensures that OTI program strategies are based on a rich mix of perspectives.



OTI's staff combine strength in political analysis with experience in humanitarian response and a commitment to sustainable development.

In addition, OTI maintains a roster of country and sectoral experts who are on "stand-by" alert. When new transition opportunities arise, they are able to engage quickly and assist in mounting fast, adept responses.

OTI staff also provide incisive and timely "on-the-ground" analyses. In Sierra Leone, such analysis helped focus the U.S. government response to the renewed violence. In the Former Yugoslavia, OTI's close relationship with media and civil society organizations enabled it to provide crucial information and analysis to the Office of the Special Representative. And, OTI staff in east Congo provided critical information on cross-border issues that was used to develop a U.S. Government strategy for the region.

Incorporating Lessons Learned, Setting the Stage for Future Successes

After five years of pioneering transition response, OTI has gained critical experience in transition countries and achieved some notable successes. But it works in some of the most unstable environments in the world, and there have also been a few failures. In some cases, OTI's efforts to advance peace were negated by macro-level conditions beyond its control, most notably a lack of political will for change, as in Angola. In other cases – Sri Lanka, Liberia, and Sierra Leone – programs were initiated before the momentum for peace gathered sufficient critical mass.

Lessons learned from both its successes and failures have helped OTI build better responses and expand its capabilities. Following is a summary of some of those lessons:

1. A timely "good" response achieves more than a too-late "perfect" response.

2. Small amounts of strategic assistance in the early days of a transition can have tremendous impact.

3. Politically-oriented interventions are necessary because political weakness often underlies the unraveling of societies.

4. To help break the cycle of crisis common to many countries in transition, programs must emphasize change. New structures and systems must be initiated.

5. Building local capacity is essential to sustaining momentum for change.

6. Testing strategies by implementing small pilot projects can help identify the most effective ways to achieve high impact.

7. New actors who can help the populace engage in fresh democratic behaviors must be brought to the fore. People invested in the status quo are unlikely to foment change.

8. Strong partnerships are crucial for success.

9. An urban, capital city bias undermines the impact of transition activities; programs must also reach out to rural areas.

10. Program interventions must respond to the specific realities, needs and opportunities of the country in transition. Generic responses are largely unsuccessful.

During its brief existence, OTI has tested many new approaches and learned a great deal about what works in transitions.

PARTNERSHIPS IN TRANSITIONS

U.S. Government

OTI collaborates closely with the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the NSC, the United States Information Agency, and many USAID offices to develop coherent and appropriate strategies for transitions. Within USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Response, OTI works in tandem with the Office of Food for Peace (FFP) and the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). Their work involves providing food and other assistance to groups made vulnerable by natural disaster, civil conflict, or other crises. Together, FFP, OFDA, and OTI consider how to integrate their program strategies, as well as ways to facilitate transitions out of relief assistance. Given its mission to advance peaceful democratic change, OTI has a special relationship with USAID's Global Bureau, Center for Democracy and Governance (G/DG). OTI and G/DG collaborate on assessment tools and program design. OTI also teams with USAID bureaus, missions, and G/DG in the development of country strategies, and almost all field assessments are conducted in partnership with other USAID offices.

Other Donor Organizations

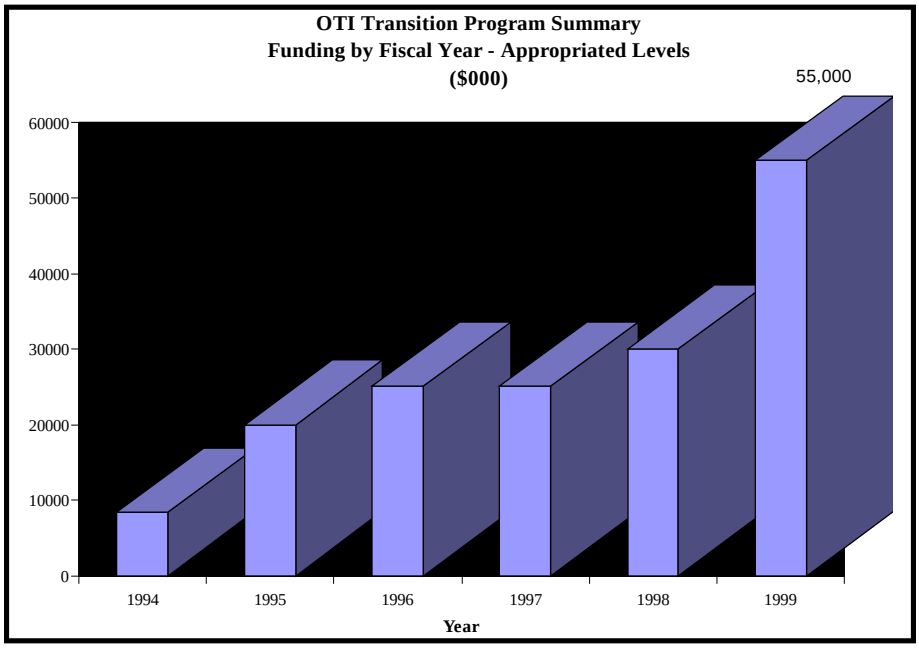
Increasingly, other donors have become aware of the importance of post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation. They are channeling more of their resources to these areas and working to build technical expertise. The British, Canadian, Dutch, German, and Swiss governments have also been actively involved in responding to states in conflict. Some have created new units similar to OTI while others have strengthened existing units within their humanitarian assistance agencies or foreign ministries. The World Bank has also established a post-conflict unit. These organizations are struggling with how they can make a difference in supporting transitions and are coordinating their efforts with other like-minded donors. In 1997, OTI hosted the first-ever donor conference on implementing transitions, and it continues to explore new methods of joint action.

Collaboration and joint leadership can accomplish more in transition environments. OTI is usually one of the first donors on the ground, and its pilot projects often lead others to invest in its program framework or engage in complementary activities. In some countries, other donors or USAID offices have initiated activities that are achieving good results, and OTI builds on their successes. This cooperative approach helps leverage limited funding and maximizes program impact.

NGOs, PVOs, and Others

OTI works in partnership with a wide array of organizations, including local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international and U.S. private voluntary organizations, U.N. agencies, intergovernmental bodies, consulting firms, for-profit organizations, and others. It places a special emphasis on partnership with local NGOs. While these groups are often overlooked or underestimated, USAID and other donors are finding that strong local ownership is one of the essential ingredients for ensuring the sustainability of efforts to advance peaceful democratic change. OTI aggressively seeks out local groups – both well-established and nascent - and provides them with the tools to take on increasingly important roles within their communities.

CONCLUSION

The international community continues to grapple with the proliferation of countries experiencing civil conflict or hovering near a state of war. At the most basic level, advancing peaceful democratic change means convincing people — often those who have never known either peace or democracy —that they can create a different future, that investing in change is worthwhile. Through its programs, OTI seeks to provide impetus for hope and expanded possibilities. This is vital work––and the need for it has never been greater.

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