

OVER THE HORIZON

PLANNING FOR A WORLD ALTERED BY COVID-19

SNAPSHOT

HIGHLIGHTS

- Over the Horizon was a strategic-planning exercise to **prepare USAID for a world altered by COVID-19** and its increasingly complex development and humanitarian landscape.
- Through the exercise, **USAID established three Strategic Objectives to focus assistance on addressing pressing challenges exacerbated by COVID 19**—by building more stable and resilient systems; responding to rising poverty, food insecurity, and lost educational opportunities; and strengthening strained public and private health systems and health security.
- As part of Over the Horizon, USAID identified a set of focus countries to concentrate its medium- to long-term response, as well as **32 specific recommendations to adapt policy, programs, and operations** to the evolving global context.
- The findings of the exercise underscore that **USAID’s unique on-the-ground expertise and assistance toolkit are more essential than ever to U.S. national security** and to this unprecedented crisis—but, to be as effective as possible, USAID must exercise leadership, equip itself to be agile, and prepare for heightened uncertainty.

A RESHAPED DEVELOPMENT LANDSCAPE

The global spread of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has had an extraordinary impact on the people, places, and partners to which the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provides assistance. The pandemic has created a new, acute national security threat for the United States. Globally, **COVID-19 presents a monumental, multifaceted humanitarian and development challenge.**

As of October, more than 40 million cases and more than 1.1 million deaths have been recorded worldwide. That amounts, in less than one year, to more than twice the number of people killed by malaria annually. **Disruptions to economies and governance are imperiling hard-won development gains and aggravating humanitarian needs**, which were already at an all-time high.

COVID-19 has profound implications for USAID’s mission and operations. **USAID anticipates significant backsliding on recent development progress**—in food security and nutrition, maternal and child health, basic education, livelihoods and poverty reduction, and in other areas. Further, the crisis seems to be amplifying pernicious trends, such as tightening restrictions on political freedoms, worsening fragility and instability, and competition among global powers. Widespread movement restrictions also constrain USAID’s operations on the ground: more than 800 staff left USAID overseas Missions on authorized departure, program access has been curtailed, and many implementing partners are under stress. Yet, amid this disruption, there are also new opportunities to enhance the impact of foreign assistance, such as from the rapid acceleration of digital transformation.

Foreign assistance is critical to the United States’ foreign policy. Delivering assistance effectively strengthens U.S. national security and economic prosperity—and it supports millions of people and partners around the world in building better lives, shaping their own futures, and doing so with a focus on self-reliance. As the lead U.S. international development and disaster assistance agency, with a presence in 80 countries and programs that reach dozens more, **USAID must confront challenges and seize opportunities posed by COVID-19.**

THE OVER THE HORIZON STRATEGIC REVIEW

USAID launched [Over the Horizon](#) (OTH) to prepare for a world altered by COVID-19. OTH was a four-month, whole-of-Agency strategic review that took place primarily between June and October 2020. OTH complemented the work of USAID's COVID-19 Task Force, which oversaw the obligation of more than \$1.3 billion of assistance and ensured continuity of operations around the world.

Whereas the Task Force managed the immediate response to the pandemic, OTH ensured USAID plans for an uncertain future. In this way, OTH built directly on the Journey to Self-Reliance and on reforms undertaken through USAID's Transformation—and will ensure their continued relevance in a rapidly evolving global context.

To oversee OTH, the Acting Administrator established a staff-level Planning Cell and a senior-level Executive Steering Committee (ESC) on June 17, 2020. The Planning Cell, housed in the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning (PPL), reported directly to the Agency's Front Office. Career experts from across USAID staffed the unit. The ESC, likewise, reflected broad expertise from 20 Senior Foreign Service officers, Senior Executive Service officials, and political appointees, including Bureau leadership and the Agency Counselor. A Mission Director Resource Group also advised the Planning Cell.

The Planning Cell conducted research and analysis in collaboration with a wide array of Agency and external experts. The Planning Cell reported findings to the ESC, which provided further guidance throughout the exercise. Through OTH, USAID analyzed the evolving strategic context, including emerging humanitarian and development needs and implications for USAID operations and U.S. national security. These findings informed **concrete and actionable recommendations to adapt policies, programs, and operations**. The process included a global, structured scenario-planning exercise, a comprehensive review of all USAID strategies and policies, surveys to field staff, a series of roundtables with external stakeholders, and thousands of person-hours of intensive data analysis and research.

INPUTS TO THE STRATEGIC REVIEW

- **Scenario Planning:** ~75 USAID technical experts reviewed 200+ data sources as part of a structured scenario-planning exercise
- **Policy Review:** 40+ issue-owners and independent reviewers conducted the first comprehensive review of all 42 active USAID development policies
- **Field Consultations:** 50+ field staff from 20+ Missions and other posts, spanning regions and including Foreign Service National staff, shared detailed suggestions and insights in surveys and consultations; a Resource Group of 8 Mission Directors also provided counsel throughout the process
- **Partner Roundtables:** ~150 participants from ~75 organizations, including implementers, think tanks, academics, and other partners, shared their perspectives in roundtable discussions
- **Collaborative Research:** 50+ experts in headquarters conducted analysis on and developed recommendations for critical priorities, investments, reforms, and innovations
- **Leadership Dialogues:** ~20 senior USAID leaders convened in facilitated sessions to review analysis, provide guidance, and deliberate on USAID's long-term response to COVID-19
- **Intelligence Briefings:** Engagement with the National Intelligence Council Strategic Futures Group on global trends

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

To understand the fluid strategic context, USAID conducted a [landscape analysis](#) followed by a rigorous, Agency-wide scenario-planning exercise. **The landscape analysis synthesized real-time data, modeled forecasts, expert opinions, and news reporting.** In the analysis, USAID identified five major trends:

MAJOR DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN TRENDS

- **A new U.S. national security imperative:** COVID-19 has far-reaching geopolitical implications. China, Russia, and Iran are exploiting the crisis to advance their agendas, including “vaccine diplomacy,” exporting authoritarianism, and building digital monopolies. Further, criminals and violent extremists are using the crisis to undermine governments and the rule of law.
- **A health crisis of enormous scale:** COVID-19 is overwhelming health care providers, facilities, and supply chains. Beyond the direct impact of the virus, the burden of other disease may grow. For example, nearly 120 million children risk missing measles vaccines this year.
- **Rising pressures on governance, democracy, and stability:** COVID-19 is straining governance and social cohesion. Dozens of countries have curtailed free expression, assembly, and media in its wake. More than 70 countries postponed elections. The rapid shift to digital platforms creates opportunities for civic engagement, but it may also entrench digital divides and increase exposure to propaganda and misinformation.
- **Severe shocks to mobility and the economy:** COVID-19 disrupted the movement of people, capital, and information. The global economy is projected to contract by 5.2 percent this year. Foreign investment in is expected to plunge by 40 percent and remittances by more than \$130 billion. Falling commodity prices and tax revenue imperil public finances in many places.
- **Devastating impacts on households:** COVID-19 is compounding household shocks: declining access to drinking water, school closures affecting more than 60 percent of the world’s students, and rising violence against women and girls, as high as a 30-percent increase in some countries. More than 113 million people will face crisis-level food insecurity this year, and 100 million people are expected to be pushed into extreme poverty, the first global increase since the 1990s.

Building on the landscape analysis, **USAID conducted a scenario-planning exercise to better understand the range of possible futures** for which the Agency and its partners may need to prepare. More than 75 Agency technical experts participated in the scenario planning, consulting more than 200 data sources—much larger in scale than any similar effort in USAID’s recent history.

Working in five independent teams, organized around each trend but also considering their overlaps, **USAID experts developed more than 30 plausible, high-impact future scenarios.** These examined interactions among major drivers of change, such as between the scale of the global economic fallout and the resiliencies of governments and other domestic institutions amid this fiscal stress. Scenarios included:

- **Catch 2022:** An economic recovery but at a cost; innovation drives uneven growth, with a significant first-mover advantage; digital divides create winners and losers, while malign actors exploit weak cybersecurity.
- **Costly Containment:** A safe vaccine is developed, but manufacturing stagnates; distribution is skewed and limited; outbreaks spread but many countries’ public and private health systems prove resilient and able to meet basic needs.
- **New Equilibrium, New Divides:** Global mobility returns; economies rebound to 2019 levels, but other headwinds remain; new capital reaches developing countries.

STRATEGIC APPROACH

Grounded in the landscape analysis and scenario planning, USAID established an OTH Goal, three Strategic Objectives (SOs), and a set of Strategic Principles to provide a framework for USAID’s medium- to long-term response to COVID-19. **This strategic approach will underpin policy decisions in headquarters and programming in the field, and it was the basis for recommendations, below—but it does not supplant USAID’s Policy Framework and the Journey to Self-Reliance, nor other sectoral or regional goals, objectives, or policy and program priorities.**

GOAL: USAID advances U.S. national security and foreign policy objectives by leading the U.S. Government’s international development and disaster assistance for a world altered by COVID-19, so that partner countries continue to build self-reliance and progress beyond assistance.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1	STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2	STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3
Build more stable, resilient systems in countries that are increasingly fragile due to COVID-19	Respond to dramatic increases in food insecurity, extreme poverty, and loss of educational opportunities in communities most impacted by COVID-19	Strengthen public and private health systems strained by COVID-19 in partner countries critical to global health security

STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES: Continue to deliver life-saving humanitarian assistance, protect hard-won development gains, and counter the negative impact of malign actors in areas of significant USAID investment and partnership.

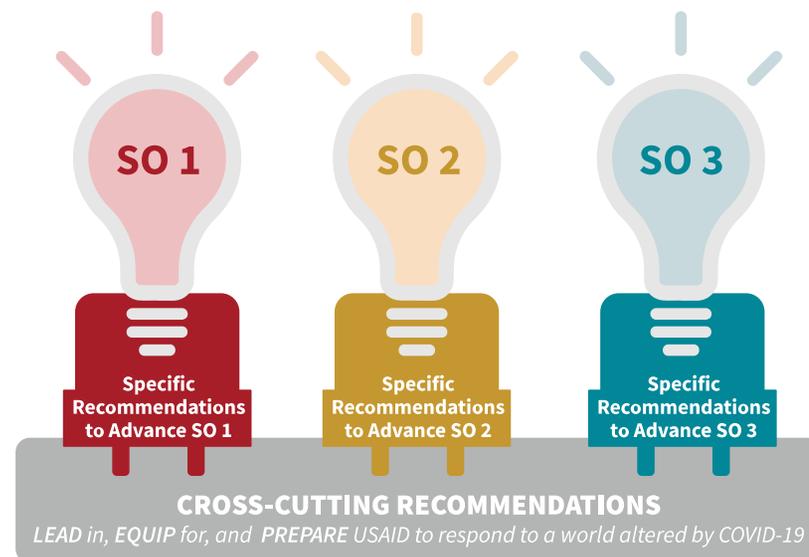
RECOMMENDATIONS

To position the Agency for new and evolving challenges, USAID developed 32 OTH recommendations. These include **16 policy and program recommendations to advance each Strategic Objective** and **16 cross-cutting recommendations** that reflect the Strategic Principles and will ensure USAID makes operational changes and provide the support to lead in the interagency and internationally, equip itself to be agile, and prepare for heightened uncertainty.

For each of the 32 recommendations, **USAID identified specific actions** to operationalize it. For example, recommendations to

advance SO 1 include for USAID to develop a strategy to improve coherence at the nexus of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding programs for countries facing compounding challenges due to COVID-19. Recommendations to advance SO 2 include for USAID to invest in digital educational tools and remote, remedial, catch-up, non-formal, and training programs, especially for marginalized populations, where learners are affected by widespread school closures. Recommendations to advance SO 3 include for USAID to help governments plan for COVID-19 vaccine rollout and to ensure equitable access, including through community engagement.

Operational recommendations cut across the SOs and support broader Agency changes to adapt to COVID-19, building on USAID’s Transformation. These include for USAID to enhance strategic communications to counter disinformation about the virus, vaccines, and related topics; to standardize good-practices in empowering Foreign Service National (FSN) staff, such as enabling FSNs to serve as office directors and senior advisors, more urgent due to the authorized departure from Missions of many Foreign Service Officers; and to establish a strategic foresight unit to build on horizon-scanning tools like FEWS NET and institutionalize planning for future uncertainty and high-impact events.



FOCUS COUNTRIES

To select focus countries, **USAID conducted a data-driven, deliberative process** to analyze country needs (both underlying needs and emerging, acute needs due to COVID-19), programmatic opportunities, and U.S. national security interests. This process employed a prioritization framework that USAID developed to overlay quantitative and qualitative data and expert perspectives. For example, indicators of need for SO 1 included both a baseline index of macroeconomic resilience and real-time data on civil unrest since the onset of COVID-19. Indicators of opportunity included an assessment of alignment with current USAID country development objectives and with areas of investment for major U.S. development initiatives, such as PEPFAR. The process also considered earlier and ongoing prioritization exercises, such as USAID's Resilience Focus Countries and the interagency effort underway to identify conflict-prevention and stabilization priorities, as required by the Global Fragility Act. USAID staff and senior leaders reviewed and refined the analysis through a series of deliberations, reflecting both technical and geographic perspectives.

The selection of OTH focus countries will inform strategic pivots, as needed, in headquarters and the field. In some focus country Missions, programs will already align with the SOs and will continue. In others, programs will need to adjust, or the Mission may design new activities to support the SOs. **Outside of the focus countries, the wider array of USAID programs and initiatives will continue as before.**

IMPLEMENTATION

To coordinate implementation of OTH, **USAID is establishing an Over the Horizon Senior Coordinating Committee and a secretariat to support it.** The Committee will promote coherence, ensure accountability, and track progress in enacting the recommendations. These bodies will liaise with existing coordination structures and engage broadly with USAID staff. Membership in the Committee will

build on that of the OTH Executive Steering Committee, with representation across Regional, Pillar, and Central Bureaus, as relevant—particularly those leading implementation of specific recommendations. A primary task for the Committee and Secretariat will be to support field teams in focus countries as they develop context-specific action plans.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

USAID's webpage on [Preparing for a World Altered by COVID-19](#) contains all public documents related to Over the Horizon. USAID will continue to publish relevant materials as they become available, including further details on the recommendations and focus countries, additional analysis, a final report, and updates on implementation.



TOPLINES: RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADVANCE EACH OF THE OTH STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1	STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2	STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3
<p>SO1.1 Support tailored, country-level analysis to assess the impact of the pandemic in fragile contexts and inform Mission-level strategic planning and implementation</p>	<p>SO2.1 Support partner-country governments in developing response plans, adopting risk-financing to manage future shocks, and devising blueprints for economic inclusion models, to move people off of humanitarian and social assistance</p>	<p>SO3.1 Build health-system resilience by strengthening capacities across public, private, faith-based, and community health structures</p>
<p>SO1.2 Build the resilience of local systems to manage the direct and follow-on impacts of COVID-19</p>	<p>SO2.2 Leverage public- and private-sector resources to mitigate rising poverty and chronic hunger by financing and scaling up innovations and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in agriculture and food security</p>	<p>SO3.2 Protect U.S. and global health security through a holistic approach inclusive of community-level health actors</p>
<p>SO1.3 Invest in improving social cohesion, civic and political engagement, inclusion of vulnerable and marginalized populations, and preventing and mitigating conflict</p>	<p>SO2.3 Invest in education plans, tools, training, strategies, and digital solutions, so learners are safe, well, and learning, despite shocks and stressors related to COVID-19</p>	<p>SO3.3 Invest in sustainable health financing and public financial management to improve health resilience and the accessibility and affordability of essential care</p>
<p>SO1.4 Invest in effective and citizen-responsive governance to manage the impacts of COVID-19, mitigate corruption, halt democratic backsliding, and build trust in democratic institutions</p>	<p>SO2.4 Invest in access to water, to accelerate economic recovery and prevent the spread of COVID-19</p>	<p>SO3.4 Promote access to a safe, licensed vaccine against COVID-19 with a clear roadmap for its rollout</p>
<p>SO1.5 Promote the participation and leadership of women and young people in pandemic relief and recovery efforts, conflict-prevention, and stabilization</p>		<p>SO3.5 Invest in and promote access to high-quality data to improve the ability to collect and share accurate information on COVID-19, so appropriate interventions can be delivered</p>
<p>SO1.6 Optimize the coherence of humanitarian, development, and peace programming in order to address compounding challenges</p>		<p>SO3.6 Support the ability of public and private health systems to address the prevention of and response to gender-based violence (GBV)</p>

TOPLINES: RECOMMENDATIONS THAT CUT ACROSS AND SUPPORT ALL OF THE OTH STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

LEAD	EQUIP	PREPARE
<p>L1 Enhance USAID’s leadership for a coordinated, global response to COVID-19 and the global economic downturn</p>	<p>E1 Ensure USAID Foreign Service Officers have the opportunity to return to the field and lead, as U.S. overseas Posts reopen</p>	<p>P1 Establish a strategic foresight unit to prepare for an uncertain and complex development and humanitarian landscape</p>
<p>L2 Leverage access to capital to bolster the pandemic response by USAID and partner-country governments</p>	<p>E2 Develop a more adaptive and diverse workforce, including through rapid assessments of and adjustment to a changing environment</p>	<p>P2 Increase the flexibility and agility of Mission-level strategic planning, in order to adapt to unpredictable and shifting contexts</p>
<p>L3 Orient USAID’s assistance toward digital development for greater inclusion, access, and efficiency as countries rebuild and reopen</p>	<p>E3 Strengthen USAID’s capacity and culture to pursue, scale, and learn from innovations to respond to emerging crises</p>	<p>P3 Improve USAID’s crisis preparedness, in anticipation of compounding crises, new crises, and future pandemics</p>
<p>L4 Intensify strategic communications to counter disinformation and build trust in fact-based information, including on COVID-19 and vaccines</p>	<p>E4 Accelerate the uptake of reforms in partnering and “connecting design to procurement,” under USAID’s <i>Acquisition and Assistance Strategy</i>, to expand the use of adaptive, locally driven approaches for more tailored programming responsive to COVID-19</p>	
<p>L5 Bolster USAID’s role as the lead U.S. Government agency for development and humanitarian assistance</p>	<p>E5 Review USAID’s global distribution of resources systematically and regularly to improve efficiencies, encourage mobility, and promote adaptability in programs, operations, and overseas presence</p>	
<p>L6 Streamline USAID’s internal budget processes for program funding</p>	<p>E6 Elevate the ability of USAID’s Foreign Service National staff to lead, which is essential to the Agency’s success at all times, but even more urgent under authorized and ordered departure</p>	
<p>L7 Work with key stakeholders to mutually identify areas for increased budget flexibility in foreign assistance programming</p>		