COVID-19

Better USAID Documentation and More-Frequent Reporting Could Enhance Monitoring of Humanitarian Efforts

What GAO Found
The Department of State (State) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) shifted to remote monitoring of their humanitarian assistance awards in response to COVID-19, but USAID documented field-level oversight inconsistently. State and USAID officials reported using technology, such as video conferencing, to communicate with agency staff and with organizations implementing the awards but generally ceased in-person meetings as well as site visits by headquarters-based staff. State used a standardized template to consistently document oversight of two nongovernmental organization (NGO) awards GAO reviewed. However, USAID did not consistently document field-level oversight of five NGO awards GAO reviewed. USAID staff were either unaware of the relevant guidance on field-level oversight or believed it was no longer in effect. Communicating to staff the expectations for documentation would help USAID preserve institutional knowledge and ensure management has information needed to make programming decisions.

USAID required implementers using fiscal year 2020 COVID-19 supplemental funds to submit monthly reports, which contributed to lessons learned and informed headquarters staff. In March 2021, USAID reverted to semiannual reporting for new awards but did not fully assess the trade-offs of doing so. Such an assessment could help USAID weigh competing factors, such as increased risks while monitoring remains curtailed by the pandemic versus the burden placed on implementing organizations by more frequent reporting.

Organizations implementing State and USAID humanitarian assistance awards adapted to COVID-19 chiefly through low-tech remote solutions and faced implementation and monitoring challenges. These adaptations included (1) increased use of social distancing and personal protective equipment (see figure), (2) teleconferences or video conferences instead of in-person meetings, and (3) increased use of remote tools, such as telephone surveys. Implementers faced related procurement, technology, and logistics challenges, which delayed program implementation.

What GAO Recommends
GAO recommends USAID better communicate expectations for documentation of field-level oversight, and assess the tradeoffs of more-frequent reporting. USAID concurred with the recommendations.