

Responding Responsibly to Disasters

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This year has been a hard one for many people around the world. Horrific natural disasters have killed thousands and disrupted the lives of many more. When we see images on our television screen we want to help, to reach out to those in need.

However, as the saying goes, “some help is no help at all.” In the rush to assist, people often send unneeded items to the disaster zone, clogging up logistical chains and taking up valuable warehouse space. Volunteers unaware of cultural differences can cause offense, or even get in the way of better qualified relief workers.

So how can one respond to humanitarian disasters without causing more problems than one solves? The following gives a brief guide to individuals and congregations who want to make a difference in a responsible way.

1) Cash Is Best

It can seem crass to say it up front, but, if you want to donate something, “Cash Is Best,” as InterAction, a coalition of US international non-profits, says. It can be moved much faster and more cheaply than donations of medical supplies, clothes or food.

It enables flexibility in the response – cash can easily be turned into food or medicine, but turning food into medicine is impossible. It can also support the economy of the disaster stricken area.

People often prefer to collect cans of food, or clothing, because there is something more tactile and participatory about giving objects rather money. However, these objects are often not needed, and can sometimes cost far more than buying them in the region.

The key is to think of ways to raise money creatively so that people feel they are part of something, and doing something interesting. Organize talent shows, 24 hour fasts, pot-luck dinners or sponsored runs.

On occasion, organizations working in the disaster area may make specific requests for certain kinds of goods, or for volunteers. When this is the case, it is appropriate to send such things, however, make sure you are sending exactly what they are asking for – it will save them a lot of time and hassle.

2) Volunteer in Your Area of Expertise

Aid agencies are often overwhelmed with offers of help in the aftermath of a disaster. For instance, a couple weeks after the tsunami I spoke with a human resources official at Doctors Without Borders.

“We received 320 volunteer applications in 10 days,” she said. “We normally have only 400 a year.”

Unfortunately, these agencies will only be able to take on a very small number of these volunteers as they want to avoid an avalanche of inexperienced people descending on the disaster zone with little coordination and understanding of relief operations.

“Volunteers without those skills can do more harm than good, and siphon off critical logistics and translations services,” says World Vision, a Christian relief and development organization.

Sometimes there is a need for people with technical backgrounds like construction, medicine or logistics, but these are often paid positions staffed by relief professionals.

Therefore, if you do not have the technical skills that are needed in the disaster areas, your best way to help may be in your home town. For instance, you can raise money through your congregation, in your workplace and among friends.

3) Coordinate Your Response

In the aftermath of a disaster, the area will often be flooded with myriad organizations all doing their own thing, with little communication.

If you are responding to a disaster, make sure your response, and the response of the organization you donate to, is well coordinated with the local government and other aid agencies. The best way to do this is to give through well-established and experienced aid agencies like the Red Cross.

4) Make a Long-Term Commitment

Disasters are soon forgotten after the initial rush of assistance. Many people who live in the affected areas have to face a long uphill climb back to normalcy and depend on sustained assistance.

Unfortunately the fickleness of the media means that today's crises will soon be yesterday's news. To counteract this, try to make a long-term commitment to partner with the communities and countries which you are helping.

Think of setting up a partnership through Outreach International. Try to learn about the places you are helping and read the latest news about them. Maybe one day you can even go visit them.

Other Resources

In short, one's responses to disasters should try to focus on the people one wants to help – what they need – rather than on what one wants to do. For more information, check out the following resources:

InterAction's Guide to Appropriate Giving:

<http://www.interaction.org/how-help>

Community of Christ World Hunger Fund

<http://www.cofchrist.org/hunger/committee.asp>

Community of Christ Disaster Relief Page

<http://www.cofchrist.org/disaster-relief/>

American Red Cross

<http://www.redcross.org/>

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