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Guidelines for Effective International Disaster Donations

The Most Productive Public Response to International Disasters Is Also the Simplest for Donors

When disaster strikes overseas, people who want to help may begin collecting items intended for use in relief operations. It is not unusual for community and civic groups to have collected thousands of pounds of material – typically used clothing, canned food and bottled water - realizing only afterward that they do not know to whom to send the collection, what their transportation options are or whether the items are actually needed. Reasons why these donations are frequently counterproductive are given below. The good news is that the simplest and easiest way to support people affected by disasters is also the most economical, efficient and environmentally friendly – through monetary donations to relief agencies.

Financial contributions enable professional relief organizations to purchase exactly what is most urgently needed by disaster survivors, when it is needed. Monetary donations allow relief supplies to be purchased near the disaster site, and avoid the delays, steep transportation and logistical costs that encumber material donations sent from far away. Some commodities, particularly food and water, can almost always be purchased locally - even after devastating emergencies and in famine situations.

Cash purchases also convey benefits beyond the items procured. They support local merchants and local economies, ensure that commodities are fresh and familiar to survivors, that supplies arrive expeditiously and that goods are culturally, nutritionally and environmentally appropriate. In contrast, unsolicited household donations can clog supply chains, take space required to stage life-saving relief supplies for distribution, and divert relief workers' time. Unsolicited collections of household items serve no useful function in the acute phase of an emergency operation. Managing piles of unrequested donations may actually add to the cost of relief work through forcing changes to logistical and distribution plans and creating more tasks for relief workers. Cash contributions to established, legitimate relief agencies are far more beneficial to survivors and to relief operations than are unsolicited donations of commodities.

You Can Help the Helpers

Every disaster is unique and every disaster response is carefully tailored to population needs that are assessed by relief professionals on the ground. Relief organizations that have personnel working in the disaster area coordinate with each other, with government entities and with local groups to make accurate assessments. These appraisals evolve daily as survivors migrate to safety and normalcy returns. Unsolicited, unneeded commodities compete with priority relief items for

transportation and storage. Relief organizations that request material donations through public appeals will communicate specifically what items are desired in order to avoid these problems.

Some foods, particularly in famine situations, can cause illness or may be culturally inappropriate. Donations of canned goods are rarely beneficial and the collection of bottled water is highly inefficient, as both food and potable water can be purchased more inexpensively through local merchants near to affected populations. In every case, survivors are most effectively helped when an accurate assessment of need leads to thoughtfully selected, appropriate commodities.

Connect Before You Collect - Confirm That There Is a Need

Some people feel a strong desire to give materially in addition to cash. Opportunities to do this are rare but do come up, usually through appeals by relief organizations. In these cases, the organization will give specific directions on exactly what to collect, a time frame in which to collect it and directions on transportation. Appeals will be advertised but interested parties can search the internet proactively. A leading source of information on relief and development agencies, where they work and what they're doing is www.interaction.org

Any call for material donations must meet the following criteria or risk burdening the relief effort it seeks to support:

- A credible relief organization has identified an unmet need for items being requested;
- An organization is prepared to receive, manage and distribute the items;
- Costs of transportation, shipping, warehousing, and distribution are covered;
- Management of customs tariffs, fees and other cross-border requirements are covered;
- Quality assurance requirements from the host government and the recipient are met and are available for disclosure.

Transportation Is Expensive and Requires Planning

It is best if transportation arrangements are secured *before* any kind of material donation is collected. A popular misconception is that the U.S. government or relief agencies will transport donations free of charge or for a fee. This may have been the case decades ago but is no longer true. Individuals or organizations that accept donated items are also responsible for paying for transportation and related fees - including customs fees - at commercial rates.

Thinking about Volunteering?

Candidates with the greatest likelihood of being chosen have fluency in the language of the disaster-affected area, prior relief experience, and expertise in technical fields such as medicine, communications, logistics, water/sanitation and engineering. In many cases, professionals who meet these requirements are available in-country, not far from disaster affected areas. Most agencies will require volunteers to have at least a few years of relief experience, as well as experience working overseas. It is not unusual for a hiring agency to request that volunteers make a commitment to spend three months or more working in a particular area.

Though kindhearted and well-intended, offers of *another body* to drive trucks, set up tents and feed children are rarely accepted. Relief agencies that hire volunteers are responsible for their care, including food, shelter, health and security. Resources are severely strained during a disaster, and a

person without technical skills and experience can be more of a burden than an asset to a relief effort.

Those who lack necessary training can participate most constructively by volunteering vicariously - through raising funds and fostering community awareness of organizations that support trained personnel on the ground. No donation is too small and every dollar contributes to saving lives and reducing human suffering in the most economical, timely, efficient and appropriate ways.

Excerpts from this document should reference the USAID Center for International Disaster Information (USAID CIDI) as the source.