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UPDATED January 28, 2010

Since the earthquake that hit Haiti, I've heard from many colleagues and friends around the world asking how best to help. This letter is a version of a more general guide I wrote and is adapted for those who wish to contribute specifically for Haitian recovery.¹

There are some lessons the disaster response community has learned over the years and which may serve as a guide for your desire to help Haiti. Here is a quick listing:

1. **Send cash.** In disasters of this magnitude, every seaport and airport in the region will quickly be jammed with relief supplies, many of them of marginal value at best. The international airport in Haiti is damaged but will soon be nearly paralyzed with incoming relief. Cash is needed by relief agencies to purchase needs locally (e.g. clothing). They do this to bolster local economies rather than hurt them with imported supplies. Where supplies are not available (e.g. medicines), they are purchased abroad and flown in by the military or at significant expense. Sending clothing, baby bottles, food, etc. at this time would not be useful. At worst, it will block critical supplies that cannot be procured locally.
2. **Contribute for reconstruction and development, not just relief.** The emergency period will be over in the next couple of weeks. Many of these needs are being met by international organizations, donor countries, and by the thousands of local volunteers. While the emergency needs are great, even greater, far greater, will be the need for funds with which to help rebuild communities and livelihoods. Unfortunately, many of the relief agencies that flood into countries after major disasters do not stay beyond the emergency period. This is why it is important to contribute to agencies and earmark funds for reconstruction and development in the affected communities and to select agencies that will be there for the long haul.

¹ The author has had a long association with Haiti dating back to the 1980s including work there on behalf of Oxfam America, The InterAmerican Foundation, and Grain Protection International. He has worked in disaster mitigation and recovery on three continents.

3. **Select agencies that know the countries.** Many of the relief agencies that are listed or advertising for contributions have never set foot in Haiti. Unless they are very specialized agencies (e.g. Doctors Without Borders), many will waste time and money trying to figure out how to operate. The best chance to help is to support those organizations with local offices already operational.
4. **Consider local organizations.** Most Americans will prefer to contribute to known US or European organizations. That is fine. If you wish, you can contribute directly to local organizations in the countries affected. The difficulty is knowing which organizations are reliable and efficiently getting the money to them. Most do not have Internet sites set up for contributions like the major US and European agencies. Sending checks or wiring funds is unreliable at this time. Where you can contribute directly, the money will go a long way though you will not get a US tax deduction unless they have a US-based 501(C)(3) non-profit channel. Also, I suggest not contributing directly to the Haitian government's direct appeals. There is no question as to their dedication to the relief of suffering in this emergency, but non-governmental, non-political organizations will be better stewards of funds for long term development.
5. **Most importantly, contribute to organizations that aim to lessen vulnerability, not just help rebuild poverty.** While tourist hotels were also damaged, a large percentage of those affected are poor people living in marginal communities. It is not enough to help people rebuild shanties. Every "natural" disaster is also an opportunity to help communities lessen their vulnerability. The most progressive international relief agencies (e.g. Oxfam, American Friends Service Committee, Mennonite Central Committee, etc.) know the conditions that bred such vulnerability and will work with local government and people to change those conditions.

At the end of this letter is a brief list of agencies that I feel meet the above criteria. This list is not meant to be exhaustive but represents a few organizations whose work and reputations I or trusted colleagues know well.

Also appended is a piece called "Five Questions to Ask Before You Give." This may be useful if you are contemplating a significant gift to an agency I have not listed.

Please let me know if I can help you in any way to make a meaningful contribution. Please feel free to forward this letter to others or post on other sites if it is useful. Let us hope that beyond immediate relief is the realization of genuine development finally to the Haitian people.

Laurence Simon

RELIEF AND DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS YOU SHOULD CONSIDER FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS²

For Emergency and Long-term Health Care

1. Doctors Without Borders <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/>
2. Partners in Health <http://www.standwithhaiti.org/haiti>

For Recovery and Development

1. Oxfam America <http://oxfamamerica.org/>
2. Mennonite Central Committee <http://mcc.org/>
3. World Neighbors
http://www.wn.org/site/c.coIELNOsGpF/b.4447437/k.91AB/Disaster_Fund.htm
4. CARE <http://www.care.org/index.asp?>

Specifically Housing reconstruction

1. Habitat for Humanity <http://www.habitat.org/>

² This list is by no means comprehensive but does represent organizations with solid track records in Haiti and a long history of direct involvement there.

Five Questions to Ask Before you Give

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January 14, 2010

The American public is searching for ways to help relieve the suffering of those affected by the earthquake that hit Haiti. Experience teaches us that much of the contributions will be wasted. Here are five simple questions to ask any aid organization before you give. Since aid agencies are inundated with phone calls, I will append a list in the next few days of organizations that I trust.

- 1. Has the organization worked in the affected countries before?**
Hundreds of organizations in the US collect funds after major disasters. Many do not have the on-the-ground experience that is critical for timely and wise utilization of the funds. Many show up in devastated nations and are not familiar with local organizations, customs or terrain. They will flounder. The best organizations to which to contribute are those who were operational in the country before the disaster. The exception to this would be specialized organizations like Doctors Without Borders.
- 2. Will the organization merely contribute your funds to another aid group?** Constituencies often contribute funds through their own channels which collect and transfer the funds to operational organizations. If you use such channels, be sure that no overheads are deducted for such pass-through grants. Overheads are legitimate when an organization is directly involved in fielding staff or materials.
- 3. Will the organization stay in the affected country after the emergency period?** Believe it or not, most private aid organizations leave about the same time the cameras do. The emergency period is short, but the period for reconstruction is very long and much more costly. It will be years before the people made homeless will be housed decently and their communities and livelihoods made whole again.
- 4. What experience does your organization have in development?**
Many organizations can provide building materials. But the aim is not to rebuild poverty, but to work with local communities to attain a higher standard of living. Expatriate organizations need to be able to work with local government and communities alike, speak their languages, understand their cultures, and patiently help them plan. The best

organizations to which to contribute are those with an understanding of the causes of vulnerability and poverty.

5. **Will your organization permit you to earmark your contribution?** No matter how small your contribution may be, it is important that you earmark it for long-term development in the affected communities of one or more of the countries. Despite what they say now about the need, the capacity of local institutions to absorb all aid funds quickly is quite limited. Earmarking encourages the aid organization to begin now to make long-range plans. It also lets the organization know that you prefer that your funds are wisely spent over a longer period than hastily spent on efforts that may be duplicating those of others.