How to Give Wisely for Disaster Relief after Hurricane Matthew
Five Lessons and Five Questions

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Nearly seven years after the Haitian earthquake that killed more than 200,000, Hurricane Matthew has now claimed many hundreds more, caused immense devastation, crop loss and an urgent need for assistance in medical relief, potable water, food and shelter. While the hurricane is a tragic reminder of the need for long-term sustainable development to build resilience in local communities and guard against the onslaught of global climate change, our most immediate attention needs to focus on humanitarian relief.

Five Lessons for Donors
Following major disasters, American families contribute many millions of dollars to relief agencies. Here is a distillation of lessons learned which may serve as a guide for contributing.

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 will soon be nearly paralyzed with incoming relief. Cash is needed by relief agencies to
purchase supplies as locally as possible. They do this to bolster local economies rather than hurt them with imported goods. Where supplies are not available (e.g. medicines), they are purchased abroad and flown in by the military or at significant expense. Your sending clothing, baby bottles, food, water, building materials 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 finding survivors and stabilizing water and food supplies, will be over in a matter of weeks. Many of these needs are being met by international organizations, donor countries, and by 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 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 that will be there for the long term and to earmark funds for reconstruction and development in the affected communities. Some of the largest relief agencies receive many millions of dollars more than their in-country emergency program can absorb. Surplus funds should be invested in long-term rehabilitation and development.

3. **Select agencies that know the countries.** Many relief agencies that issue appeals to their constituencies or advertise 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 or established ties to local and competent partner organizations.

4. **Consider local organizations in the affected country.** Most Americans will prefer to contribute to known US or European organizations, often within their faith communities or nationally recognized. 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. When you can contribute directly to reputable local organizations, the money may be well utilized though you will not get a US tax deduction unless they have a US-based 501(c)(3) non-profit channel registered with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. Also, I do not recommend contributing directly to the appeals of foreign governments. Even where there is no question as to their dedication to the relief of suffering in emergencies, 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 helping to rebuild poverty.** In most disasters in developing nations, those most affected and who have the longest and most difficult recovery 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, America Jewish World Service, Catholic Relief Services, Mennonite Central Committee, to name a few) know the conditions that bred such vulnerability and know that they must work with local government and communities to change those conditions.

At the end of this letter is a short list of agencies that I trust. This list is not meant to be exhaustive and represents but a few organizations whose work I have admired in the field of relief and development.

**Five Questions to Ask Before you Give**

The American public is searching for ways to help relieve the suffering of those affected by disasters. Unfortunately charitable organizations are often not prepared to make the most of your money. Here are Center for Global Development and Sustainability’s five simple questions to ask any aid organization before you give.

1. **Has the organization worked in the affected country 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, language or terrain. They will flounder. The best organizations to contribute to are those which were operational in the country before the disaster. An exception to this rule should be allowed for specialized organizations like Doctors Without Borders that have vast global experience and capacity for immediate impact.

2. **Will the organization merely contribute your funds to another aid group?** Constituencies often contribute funds through their own charities which collect and transfer the funds to operational organizations. If you use such channels, be sure that no or very low 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 is often years
before people made homeless by disasters are 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 for sustainable development. 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 country. 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.

**RELIEF AND DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS YOU MIGHT CONSIDER FOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

**For Emergency and Long-term Health Care**


**For Recovery and Development**

3. World Neighbors [http://www.wn.org/site/c.coIELNOsGpF/b.4447437/k.91AB/Disaster_Fund.htm](http://www.wn.org/site/c.coIELNOsGpF/b.4447437/k.91AB/Disaster_Fund.htm)
4. American Jewish World Service [https://ajws.org/](https://ajws.org/)

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1. This list is by no means comprehensive but does represent organizations with solid track records in Haiti.
2. Dr. Simon was a senior staff person at Oxfam America in the 1970s and 80s. He was also the founding president of the American Jewish World Service. He has no official ties to either organization currently.