

## **Five Questions to Ask Before you Give**

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The American public is searching for ways to help relieve the suffering of those affected by the tsunami in the Indian Ocean. 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, please see the attached abbreviated list 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 millions of 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.