

## **GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE INTERNATIONAL DISASTER DONATIONS**

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 items – typically used clothing, canned food and bottled water. Unfortunately, despite good intentions, material donations can actually be counterproductive in relief efforts because of logistical management and transportation and related costs. These items may also not be necessary and can have negative implications on local markets and producers. The good news is that the simplest and easiest way to support response efforts is also the most economical and efficient – through cash donations to relief agencies.



Pakistan Floods 2010  
Photo credit : Humanitarian Coalition

### **CASH IS BEST**

**Here are 5 reasons why cash donations are the most efficient way to help:**

1. Financial contributions allow professional relief organizations to purchase exactly what is most urgently needed by disaster survivors, when it is needed.
2. Every disaster is unique and every disaster response is carefully tailored according 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. Survivors are most effectively helped when an accurate assessment of need leads to thoughtfully selected, appropriate commodities.



Pakistan Floods 2010  
Photo credit : Humanitarian Coalition

3. Cash donations allow relief supplies to be purchased near the disaster site, avoiding the delays, steep transportation and logistical costs that can encumber material donations. Some commodities, particularly food, can almost always be purchased locally – even after devastating emergencies and in famine situations. A popular misconception is that the Canadian government or relief agencies will transport donations free of charge, or even 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
4. 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.
5. Unsolicited household donations can clog supply chains, take space required to stage life-saving relief supplies for distribution, and divert relief workers' time. Managing piles of unsolicited items may actually add to the cost of relief work through forcing changes to logistical and distribution plans and creating more tasks for relief workers.
6. Cash donations are quick and easy to process for tax deductions. But, in the case of in kind donations, receipting is much more complicated and costly for charities. Besides, you have to provide documentation that officially establishes the fair market value of the item, when you request a receipt. In addition, charities don't issue tax deductions for all donated items.

### **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 those cases, the organization will give specific directions on exactly what to collect, a time frame in which to collect it and directions on transportation.

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

- A credible relief organization has identified a 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.



East Africa droughts  
 Photo credit : Humanitarian Coalition

East African droughts  
Photo credit : Humanitarian Coalition



## HOW ABOUT VOLUNTEERING?

Volunteers without prior disaster relief experience are generally not selected for overseas assignments. 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 candidates to have at least five years of relief experience, as well as several years of experience working overseas. It is not unusual for a hiring agency to request that volunteers make a commitment to spend at least three months 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 volunteers' well being, including food, shelter, health and security. Resources are 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, efficient and appropriate ways.

### Useful links

- <http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/donors/>
- Charityvillage.ca (volunteer opportunities)
- [http://www.international.gc.ca/humanitarian-humanitaire/canadians\\_help-aide\\_canadien.aspx](http://www.international.gc.ca/humanitarian-humanitaire/canadians_help-aide_canadien.aspx)
- <http://les.acdi-cida.gc.ca/project-browser> (to see what projects are current under way and which organization is working in which country)