



Brief: Overseas Emergencies and Public Donations

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This brief sets out how the Australian public can contribute during overseas emergencies and why cash donations are preferable to goods in kind during emergencies.

1. There's an emergency overseas, how can I help?

The general policy of ACFID is that financial donations to humanitarian appeals are almost always preferable to gifts in kind.

During an emergency, we suggest donating to an ACFID member organisation. ACFID members are signatories to the ACFID Code of Conduct, a voluntary, self-regulatory sector code of good practice that aims to improve international development outcomes and increase stakeholder trust by enhancing the transparency and accountability of signatory organisations. Covering over 50 principles and 150 obligations, the Code sets good standards for program effectiveness, fundraising, governance and financial reporting. Compliance includes annual reporting and checks. The Code has an independent complaints handling process. In times of emergencies, ACFID members work with organisations on the ground who can disburse funds in responsible, effective and transparent ways. During emergencies, a full list of ACFID members running appeals is available on the ACFID website: www.acfid.asn.au

Volunteering is often a great way of contributing your skills and knowledge to a community. Information and useful links about volunteering are available at: <http://www.acfid.asn.au/get-involved/volunteering>.

2. Why should I send cash rather than goods?

An effective response to disasters involves responding to needs as they are identified by local, provincial and national government authorities, as well as aid agencies on the ground (including United Nations organisations and NGOs) rather than providing goods that donors have at their disposal.

In an emergency situation, agencies work together, often with local and national governments, to ensure a coordinated approach to the needs of affected populations. Using cash donations, aid agencies are able to utilise existing markets to source culturally appropriate food and clothing, access safe supplies of medicine and work on the ground with communities to provide water, sanitation, shelter and other immediate needs.

Cash donations are preferable to gifts in kind for the following reasons:

- **Cost:** The costs associated with transport, storage and distribution of gifts in kind often outweigh the benefit of the goods provided.¹ Transporting food and other goods to disaster affected areas can often take weeks, and in many cases may arrive too late to meet immediate needs. These goods may also clog up supply routes and warehouses and prevent life-saving supplies in getting through to affected countries.
- **Culture:** It is important to ensure that goods provided are culturally appropriate for affected communities. There are instances of jeans being sent to Darfur, where people do not wear trousers or culturally inappropriate food (such as Bacon or cheeses) being provided after an emergency, which may be at odds with dietary practices or culturally offensive. Cash donations allow aid workers to ensure that goods are culturally, dietary and environmentally appropriate.

¹ See USAID's Greatest Good Donation Calculator to understand the cost of shipping products and what relief organisations can do with that money: <http://www.cidi.org/how-disaster-relief-works/greatest-good-donation-calculator>

- **Economy:** Gifts in kind may distort local economies, which often struggle to recover after a crisis. Goods that are provided free of cost, often force down the price of locally produced items thus distorting the local market. Sourcing goods locally can both stimulate local economies and provide for immediate needs following a crisis.
- **Relevance:** In the case of donations of items such as machinery or medical equipment, consideration needs to be given to whether the intended recipients have the skills and knowledge required to operate and maintain the equipment, noting that replacement parts may not be available for equipment that is outdated or discontinued. It is also necessary to make sure the goods being sent comply with the recipient country's import regulations, as lengthy customs delays can lead to additional costs for aid agencies.

Instead of sending goods in-kind, consider selling the items in Australia and giving the money to an ACFID member.

3. When is it appropriate to send goods during emergencies?

It is important to never assume that relief goods will be transported by any organisation, including the Australian Defence Force. **Before collecting and sending any non-cash donations you should identify an organisation that is willing and able to accept, transport and distribute the goods.** You should also ensure that the goods to be provided meet a genuine need in the affected community and are of an appropriate quality.

Goods: Donations of toys, clothing, blankets or books are generally not needed after a crisis and, unless specifically requested by an organisation responding to a disaster situation, should not be collected or sent.

Food: In most disasters food scarcity is not an immediate problem, although distribution networks are frequently disrupted. If food is requested, donated foodstuffs must be non-perishable, appropriate to the local culture, and clearly labelled. Cultural appropriateness of the types of food-stuff provided must be given due consideration. For example: powdered milk in lactose intolerant populations or those with no access to clean water can have the unintended consequence of increasing child fatalities.

Medicines: Donations of medicines (other than commercial quantities) are not collected and sent except via authorised organisations. Medical supplies are highly specialised commodities that must be distributed in an effective and timely way. Medicine donations must be based on the internationally agreed interagency and World Health Organization standards² and coordinated by experienced relief organisations. They must have a shelf life of at least 12 months after arriving in the country and old prescription medicines should never be sent. In instances where medicine requires a continuous cold chain, a donating organisation will need to ensure evidence of that cold chain. Appropriate consideration should also be given to whether the medicines or medical supplies are important to the needs of affected populations.

4. For further information, please see:

- 'In-kind donations: who benefits?' <http://www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-49/in-kind-donations-who-benefits>
- 'Killing relief with kindness': <https://dfid.blog.gov.uk/2010/01/15/killing-relief-with-kindness/>
- Resources from USAID's Centre for International Disaster Information:
 - Guidelines for Giving: <http://www.cidi.org/how-disaster-relief-works/guidelines-for-giving>
 - Why Cash is Best: <http://www.cidi.org/how-disaster-relief-works/monetary-contributions-work-bestwhy-cash-is-best>
 - Good Intentions Blog: <http://www.cidi.org/the-scoop/good-intentions-blog>

² Interagency Guidelines for Medicine Donations (Revised 2010), World Health Organisation, 2011 Available online at: http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241501989_eng.pdf , last accessed 21/10/2014