

Overseas Emergencies & Responsible Donating

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.

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.

When an emergency happens overseas, many Australians are moved to assist in any way they can. ACFID greatly appreciates the generosity of the Australian public to provide financial and non-financial support during these times.

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. In times of emergencies, ACFID members work with organisations on the ground who can disburse funds in responsible, effective and transparent ways.

A full list of ACFID members running appeals is available on [the ACFID website](#).

Why should I send cash rather than goods?

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. 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.
- **Resources:** Sorting donations can use up a lot of the valuable time of first responders, volunteers and workers. Similarly, donations cost the country container rental and storage fees, money that could have been better spent on the disaster response.

- **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
- **Environment:** Donations that are not needed have significant environmental impact, as they either end up in landfill or use resources to be destroyed.

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 foodstuff 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 standards 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.

Resources and Further Information

- DID YOU KNOW that sending bottled water to a disaster site overseas can be 1,000 times more expensive than producing safe drinking water locally? The Centre for International Disaster Information, in collaboration with relief professionals, have created a Greatest Good Donations Calculator to demonstrate why transporting material goods is so expensive. <https://www.cidi.org/how-to-help/donations-calculator/>
- DID YOU KNOW that the volume of goods that arrived in Fiji after Tropical Cyclone Winston was the equivalent of 33 Olympic swimming pools? Visit Donate Responsibly for essential information on donating the Pacific in emergencies <https://donateresponsibly.org/>


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