



**HOW YOU
CAN HELP**



A GUIDE TO ASSISTING THE POOR IN TIMES OF DISASTER

Introduction

Disasters such as earthquakes, floods, famine and war often occur when people least expect them. When such disasters strike, immediate action is needed to save lives.

Ireland has a proud tradition of helping the victims of disaster, right across the world. Over the past fifty years the support given by Irish people to disaster victims through aid agencies has been enormous. Without their generosity many thousands of lives would have been needlessly lost.

It is hugely important that this support continues into the future. Today, as our understanding of the needs of people affected by disasters has developed, it is important that we continue to help and that we seek to ensure that we provide the right kind of aid to people in need.

This guide provides useful suggestions on how you can help aid agencies to give the right kind of aid. It has been developed in order to inform everyone - from staff working in aid agencies to members of the public - about how best to lend support in a time of emergency. It outlines how Ireland and the world respond to disasters and emergency situations and how members of the Irish public can help people whose lives have been shattered by disasters.

The guide is comprised of six main sections:

1. When Disaster Strikes – How the World Responds
2. When Disaster Strikes – How Ireland Responds
3. How Aid Agencies can help
4. How you can help
5. What not to do
6. For more Information

1. When Disaster Strikes – How The World Responds

“The primary goals of humanitarian action are to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of humanitarian crises.”

White Paper on Irish Aid, 2006

Disasters strike at different times and places in the world, often without warning. Floods, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions can all occur unexpectedly. Other disasters such as war and famine may not be as sudden, but can be equally devastating.

In general, the local and national emergency services in the countries affected try to respond as quickly and as effectively as they can to come to the aid of people in need. All countries have their own systems designed to respond to emergencies, with varying degrees of efficiency. Clearly, the quality of the response mechanisms has a major bearing on the number of lives saved in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.

The reaction of people close to the scene of the disaster has a very significant influence on the impact of a disaster. Neighbours and relatives are always the first to help at the scene. Local communities also come to the assistance of neighbouring communities and their immediate assistance can save many lives.

This response from the local people needs to be supported quickly and efficiently by competent emergency services. However in many developing countries the local emergency services are ill equipped to cope with large scale and sudden crises. In large-scale disasters, countries often seek help from the international community. In the age of instant information, news of major disasters travels fast, and international aid can be mobilised extremely quickly. Countries can decide to seek assistance if their national services are overwhelmed. Governments may respond to the request, either directly through the provision of financial aid, or indirectly by supporting the work of international organisations such as the United Nations (UN) or the European Union (EU).

Meanwhile aid agencies, many of which would already be working in the affected country, will be gathering important information, which will be used to ensure that the immediate needs of the people are known. Acting on this information, international aid agencies co-operate with the government of the affected country in order to decide the kind of support needed.

Many agencies decide that the best way to give assistance is through organisations who are already working in the country and who are familiar with local and national systems. These organisations are often referred to as partner organisations and their efforts may be supported by key specialist staff employed by the aid agency itself.



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Once adequate information is available from sources on the ground, Governments, the United Nations, international aid agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) work to alleviate the situation. Each will develop their own response, based on their role and experience, but also on a number of internationally agreed rules and standards of quality. They will complement the work of one another to provide food, medicine, equipment shelter and qualified personnel to help the country cope with the disaster.

It is also important to note that the relief work does not stop as soon as the disaster has stopped being news. Typically, aid agencies involved in alleviating the effects of a disaster expect to be involved with the affected population for up to three years afterwards.

2. When Disaster Strikes – How Ireland Responds

“In responding to emergencies, we will work with a variety of partners that can respond effectively to people’s real needs on the ground”

White Paper on Irish Aid, 2006

Ireland has a well-established track record in responding to emergencies. Irish Aid and the major aid agencies have experienced specialist staff who are trained in carrying out emergency assessments. They can send highly trained medical staff, water and sanitation engineers and equipment such as medicines and emergency shelters to the affected region.

Not being familiar with local systems and infrastructure, these specialist staff work with partner organisations in the affected country to ensure that the affected people have adequate food, water and shelter to meet their immediate needs.

The effects of a disaster continue to be felt long after the television cameras have departed to the next news story. The reconstruction of people’s homes and the rehabilitation of their lives often takes many years. Usually, the poorest people will find it the hardest to rebuild their lives.

The generosity of the Irish people in the face of such adversity is well documented. However it is important that the right kind of aid is given at the right time so that the affected population has the best opportunity to restore their means of earning a living. The following sections list the mechanisms and principles that aid agencies use to ensure that their aid works..

3. How Aid Agencies help

“Central to all humanitarian crises is vulnerability. The primary cause of vulnerability in developing countries is poverty.”

- *White Paper on Irish Aid, 2006*

It is critically important that only the right aid is sent to affected regions, and that the aid is given in ways that allow people to rebuild their lives: aid is about saving livelihoods as much as it is about saving lives.

Aid agencies have developed a number of clear guidelines and principles for their aid efforts. These are based on their experience, but also on international law.

International Humanitarian Law

Humanitarian aid is governed by three sets of internationally agreed laws:

- ⇒ The Geneva Conventions: agreed by 194 countries, these Conventions set standards for countries' behaviour in times of war.
- ⇒ Human Rights Law: a set of internationally agreed treaties penalising violations of human rights such as war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.
- ⇒ Refugee Law: a 1951 UN convention, regulating the treatment of refugees.

For instance, aid agencies aim to be neutral, impartial and independent. They strive to work as much as possible with local partners. They try to buy relief items as close to the disaster area as possible, in the hope of reviving the local economy and they are committed to working in close coordination with other aid agencies.

3.1 Key principles of effective Humanitarian Aid

- ⇒ We work on the basis of needs of the victims, not donor's priorities.

Aid should be given to people regardless of race or religion, and should be given on the basis of people's needs. The needs of the people affected by the disaster are assessed by competent authorities, and the Irish aid agencies will inform the Irish public of the specific type of assistance that is (and is not) needed.

- ⇒ Aid must be appropriate.

All aid must help people in need and it must be the right kind. Humanitarian assistance given by aid agencies should be based on accurate information received from the disaster area and be provided in consultation with the local authorities and communities.

There should be no double standards in quality. If the quality of an item is unacceptable in the donor country then it is also unacceptable as a donation.

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⇒ Aid must be cost-effective.

Inevitably, there are costs involved in delivering aid but every precaution must be taken to ensure that all money is used in the best way possible to alleviate the effects of the disaster.

⇒ We work in partnership with others.

Irish aid agencies work through established coordination mechanisms such as UN bodies and government structures, to ensure that the correct aid reaches the people who need it. We will ensure to co-ordinate our efforts so that we don't duplicate work or waste valuable resources.

⇒ Our aid saves livelihoods as well as lives.

In our efforts to assist the victims of disasters we take account of future needs as well as immediate needs. Our assistance will lay the foundations for reconstruction and redevelopment and we will be involved in assisting the affected people for a minimum of three years. Our emergency aid should serve to reduce the risks of future disasters.

These are important principles by which all governments and aid agencies should abide. Members of the Irish public also have a critical role to play, as it is their generosity and support, which underpins the assistance provided by the agencies. The following section outlines the ways in which members of the public can help.

4. How you can help

(a) Donate Money

Giving money is the best way to help in a time of crisis. Donated money enables professional relief organisations to purchase exactly what disaster victims need most urgently. With your money, relief supplies can be purchased as near to the disaster location as possible ensuring that local (often poor) economies benefit. That way, the supplies arrive quickly, transport and storage costs are kept to a minimum and the goods are guaranteed to be suitable for local conditions.

Donating money is the best way to help because it ensures that agencies will have enough funding to deliver effective aid. Irish people have been incredibly generous when asked to respond to emergency situations in the past. Their support has enabled aid agencies to respond to disasters, and to make their information and skills available where they are most needed. We will continue to need this money to support our work.

You can check out the websites of the aid agencies to find out how to make a donation.

1.

Question:

I want to make sure my money goes straight to the victims and is not spent on overheads of the aid agency. How can I do this?

Answer:

It is not possible to deliver aid without incurring costs. Transport is expensive. Staff will be needed to identify the beneficiaries, arrange transportation and distribute the aid. At the same time there is a responsibility on the part of the aid agency to ensure that all overheads are kept to a minimum without compromising the effective delivery of aid to the people who need it most. Information on the overheads incurred by agencies are available in their annual accounts.

Do remember that the organisation with the lowest overheads is not necessarily the best. Be sure to ask for detailed information from the agency about their activities. Only donate to organisations whose work you approve of.

(b) Volunteer your services

Aid agencies need people to help in a number of different ways. In the aftermath of a humanitarian disaster, it is vital that the response of the international community is immediate and well co-ordinated in order to save as many lives as possible. Therefore volunteers usually have previous disaster or international experience and technical skills (e.g. medicine, communications, water and sanitation, engineering) and are usually from neighbouring countries not affected by the disaster. Those with the necessary skills and experience who would like to volunteer should contact the Irish aid agencies

If you want to prepare yourself so that you can work in disaster situations in the future, contact the Irish Aid information centre or an aid agency to ask for advice about how to receive relevant training, which will equip you with the right skills. Training is available from a variety of institutes in Ireland.

Question:

I'd love to volunteer to help out in the disaster but do I have the right skills?

Answer:

Well-intentioned people who lack disaster experiences and technical skills and who are not familiar with the local culture and language can become a hindrance to relief efforts without realising it. They can get in the way, or use up valuable resources such as transport and accommodation, without effectively contributing to the relief effort.

If you do want to help and you do not have the skills and experience to work in the disaster region itself you can play a very important role in the relief effort by volunteering in Ireland. It is possible to volunteer your skills to help the aid agency here in Ireland. You could staff phone lines for an aid agency and take donations or it may be possible to organise a local fundraising event.

For more information, see www.volunteeringoptions.org

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➡ (c) Donate regularly to an aid agency

By donating regularly to an aid agency you help them to create an emergency relief fund, which will enable the agency to respond quickly and effectively in a time of crisis. Furthermore many emergencies around the world do not gain the attention of the media and are often termed 'forgotten emergencies'. Aid agencies continue to work in these areas and a constant source of income enables the agency to continue to support the relief efforts even when the TV cameras are not present.

➡ (d) Get involved in a campaign

Campaigning for a fairer world can reduce the vulnerability of poor people to the effects of natural disasters. Very often the root causes of human disasters are related to injustice. Developing countries need to be given the opportunity to prosper through fairer trade conditions and the cancellation or renegotiation of crippling debt repayments as well as receiving increased financial assistance from the developed countries. Countries like Ireland have an obligation to help create these fairer conditions. You can contribute to this by joining campaigns organised by Irish aid agencies.

➡ (e) Tell others

If you are a teacher or youth worker, engage young people in activities and discussions around the issues related to emergencies. Many of the aid agencies have resource materials with ideas on how best to do this. If people in your workplace are looking to respond when an emergency arises, organise a briefing on the most appropriate kind of aid and explain why. The information in this leaflet will help you to do this.

5. What Not To Do

⇒ Do not make material donations

The natural response of many people when confronted with evidence of a disaster is to organise a collection of items that they think are urgently needed. *Please don't do this.*

If you donate items that have not specifically been requested by an aid agency you may actually prevent the transportation of essential items by taking up valuable transport and storage space en route to the affected area. In the aftermath of a disaster, roads are often damaged or un-passable and can become jammed with shipments of non-priority items.

Most supplies can be purchased locally, even in famine situations. And though the effects of the disaster may be enormous, a country is rarely completely devastated. In most disaster situations, it is not the absence of goods that is the issue, but the difficulty in distributing goods to those that need them most.

⇒ Do not send household foods.

Certain foods, particularly in famine situations can make people ill. The cost of transporting food is very high and it is more cost effective to source it from local or neighbouring countries markets.

⇒ Do not send household medicines.

Donated drugs are often not useful in an emergency situation. They are often unknown to local health professionals who have to waste time sorting them. Drugs have a limited shelf life, and often have to be refrigerated. Expired drugs incur additional costs for the aid agencies because they have to be destroyed².

⇒ Do not send second hand clothing.

It is more economical to source clothes locally than to ship them long distances.

In addition, the time and money needed to sort these goods can be at the expense of the emergency activities relief workers are attempting to carry out. If these items are needed, the large international agencies will have them pre-prepared or will be able to source them locally.

2. For detailed information on drug donations please consult the 'Guidelines for Drug Donations' produced by the

6. For More Information

Irish aid agencies all provide detailed information about their work. The Irish Government also provides excellent information about the crises it responds to and its work with other Governments to improve the international community's response to emergencies and disasters.

Across Europe, there are numerous research and information offices that provide information about humanitarian principles and the ways in which we can reduce human suffering³.

You will find a number of these organisations listed on the Dóchas website at www.dochas.ie and on the www.howyoucanhelp.ie website.

Useful information is also available from the following sources:

⇒ Irish Aid

Department of Foreign Affairs,
Bishops Square,
Redmond Hill,
Dublin 2.
www.irishaid.gov.ie

⇒ Centre for International Disaster Information

Organisation, which provides detailed and up to date information on disasters around the world and guidance for the public on how to provide assistance.
www.cidi.org

⇒ Pan American Health Organisation

PAHO have produced a guide for effective aid in disaster situations. Available online at www.paho.org

⇒ World Health Organisation

The United Nations specialised agency for Health.
www.who.int

⇒ Interaction

A coalition of more than 160 humanitarian organizations working on disaster relief, refugee-assistance, and sustainable development programs worldwide.
www.interaction.org

⇒ Reliefweb

Independent organisation providing up to date and reliable information on emergencies around the world.
www.reliefweb.int

Thank you for taking the time to read this guide and please continue to give your valuable support to agencies in their important work.

3. Some useful reference points include: <http://www.goodhumanitariandonorship.org/>, www.reliefweb.int, www.paho.org.

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