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Saundra Schimmelfennig; 23 April 2010

Six Questions You Should ask Before Donating Goods Overseas

With the recent TOMS Shoes “One Day Without Shoes” campaign and the confiscated goods sent to Haiti, it is easy to see why so many people believe that sending donated goods overseas is a great way to help.

Unfortunately, donated goods often go unused because they are inappropriate to the local climate, culture or religion. Donations can do more harm than good when they outcompete local merchants selling similar goods or cost the recipients money to dispose of the inappropriate goods. Finally, it often costs more to ship used goods than to buy new goods locally.

Donated goods have caused so many problems that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) teams up with the Center for International Disaster Information each year to host a public service announcement contest to help educate donors. This year's winners were just announced.

6 questions you should ask before donating goods overseas:

1. Is the donation appropriate for the local climate, culture, and religion?
2. After a disaster, will an influx of donated goods clog the ports?
3. Are the items actually needed?
4. Are the goods available locally?
5. Will the people receiving the goods be able to afford to fix or replace the donated item?
6. Will donating this item do more harm than good?

Let's go through them one by one.

Is the donated item appropriate for the climate, culture, religion of those you are trying to help?

Far too many examples of inappropriate donations came from the tsunami. Winter hat, coats, and gloves to southern Thailand. Canned pork and skimpy clothing donated to Muslim communities. None of these donations were actually used and some of them were offensive as well.

Will an influx of donated items clog the ports?

All people and goods arriving in a country must enter through sea or air ports. The influx of people and goods entering a country after a disaster may far exceed the capacity of the local government or the damaged ports and infrastructure to process and transport arriving shipments. This can lead to a bottleneck of goods waiting to be processed and distributed. Unless the country has the staff and capacity to unload, sort, clear, and move goods out of the port, well-intended donations of clothing and other supplies may prevent shipments of critical relief supplies from getting through.

Are the items actually needed?

A church group once invited me to help them with a care package they were sending to the needy in Thailand. I declined when I saw what they were sending; cloth diapers and diaper pins, and baby bottles. Rural Thais didn't use diapers or bottles at that time.

Bottles were also rarely used, and only by those who were well-off or married to a foreigner. Everyone else breastfed, even working women. My neighbor babysat for a nurse who worked at the hospital a block or two up the road. The nurse came to the house several times a day to breastfeed her baby. Bottle feeding would require either a breast pump and refrigeration or baby formula. If they could afford either of those options they would be wealthy enough not to need donated bottles.

Are the goods available locally?

Even after disasters it may be possible to purchase goods from the areas surrounding the disaster site that were not destroyed. Purchasing goods from those areas ensures that the goods are appropriate to the local climate and culture. It also supports livelihoods which helps people help themselves.

After the tsunami, a group of students shipped donated school supplies to Thailand. The person picking them up paid more in clearing customs and shipping them to the affected area than he would have if he'd bought them from the local marketplace. Purchasing goods locally puts money into the economy. Not only does the person selling it to you make a little profit, but they will likely order more, increasing sales at the factory as well.

Will the people receiving the goods be able to afford to fix or replace the donated item?

Imagine if Russia donated cars to your state to help during the financial crisis. You might be thrilled to receive a free car (although the U.S. car manufacturers and dealerships will not be thrilled that their market was undercut) until the first time you had to repair it. The owner's manual printed in Russian won't be too helpful, and it will be difficult to find a mechanic or spare parts for the vehicle.

Items like imported pipes may not work with local systems because of differences in threads or diameters based on inches, not centimeters. If the pipes are broken they cannot be replaced, nor can the system be expanded. If you decide to donate bottles and formula, can the women who are no longer nursing afford to buy more when the donation runs out?

Will giving this item do more harm than good?

Unfortunately we often know so little about the effects of our donations that you may not be able to answer this question. After the tsunami, due to media hype and a desire to help, thousands of people donated clothing. So many clothes were donated to India that truckloads of them were just dumped alongside the road. They became a choking hazard for the local cattle and government staff had to be diverted from the recovery effort to dispose of the donations.

Tons of donated medicine go unused after every disaster because they are inappropriate for the local situation, not labeled in the local language, or simply not needed. Properly disposing of this unused medicine can cost the country thousands of dollars. Donated baby formula mixed with contaminated water can lead to severe diarrhea and potentially death due to dehydration.

Consider donating within your own community

Although it is tempting to donate goods to help people overseas, it is usually cheaper and better to just send money. Instead of sending over your bras and flip flops, hold a community garage sale and donate the proceeds, or contact a local charity and see how you can best help.

Other Resources:

- Dóchas: [How You Can Help.ie](#)
- Interaction: [How to Help](#)
- CID: [Guidelines for appropriate International Disaster Donations](#)