

# GIVING UNTIL IT HURTS

## A Chance to Debilitate Bad Aid

**R**elief efforts and disaster aid are huge! They are needed, wanted, and easy to contribute to with developing technology. Send one text and a life is saved! Forward an email and the children are fed! Donate a dollar with today's purchase and help victims of Haiti! Aid agencies and organizations have become masters at collecting money. This skill however presents a disaster in and of itself. Both monetary and in-kind donations are being gathered and collected effectively by aid agencies and organizations. Unfortunately, the actual process of finding roads clear enough to drive on and areas safe enough to land an aircraft in, makes the donations of unrequested and unneeded items a nuisance to the community. Donations fill up warehouses, roads, and often are never distributed. The reason behind the undistributed and inadequate aid and relief efforts is lack of communication. Communication between aid agencies is responsible for transforming people's good intentions to provide for and help those in need, into confusion and disarray.

Major problems directly related to the complete lack of organization and communication failures related to relief efforts, aid distribution, and disaster response in

places such as Thailand, New Orleans, Chile, and more recently in Haiti are only increasing in severity.



Comfort: A man holds a child in his arms as they wait in a makeshift camp

Following the tsunami which hit Thailand in 2004 many organizations rushed in to help. One-third of organizations that arrived were new organizations, who not only had use the “trial and error” approach, but in doing so many groups attempted to build housing in an area that was unrealistic because transportation to the area was challenging without roads or vehicles (Block, par 9). These agencies failed to communicate and gather information from the local community and from organizations already at the site. Unaware of what kind of assistance was needed, where it was needed, who



and what places had already received assistance, and who would be qualified to provide it, many organizations still poured into “help” responding to, not the actual people in the disaster area, but all the ads and media telling and asking them to “send help now.”

The volunteerism in Thailand hindered relief efforts by creating overcrowding and pulling from limited resources, such as food, water, and basic shelter. Volunteers working for free were depriving locals from having paid jobs and money to rebuild their roads, houses, and lives. All that is provided for free by aid agencies is another thing a community member will lose money on if unable to sell, this includes items like home building tools or clothes. A blatant slam of decreased sales on the economy.

As volunteers arrive, disaster response inevitably has to coordinate tasks for volunteers to do so as not to further complicate things by being a safety hazard or being naive to the culture. Trained relief effort specialist Sandra Schimmelpennig is qualified and experienced in disaster response. Sandra responded to the Thailand tsunami with a basic understanding of the culture and communication procedures in place. Sandra’s talents, experience, knowledge, and lifesaving capabilities were wasted when the newest need became coordination of the poorly organized volunteers coming in by the

thousands. To prevent further confusion, Sandra became the volunteer coordinator. Making sure the volunteers had food, setting volunteers up in housing, attempting to find projects volunteers could do, such as build boats that really weren’t needed. Projects such as the boat building were instated to avoid worsening the situation. Safety hazards of placing people without building skills in home building sites was one concern. A second concern was the finished

product, a house build by inadequate volunteers. Who would want people who don’t know anything about construction to build their new residency if instead there was an option of having one trained builder train locals to do it on their own?

Haiti now faces a very similar volunteer overload concern. Thousands of volunteers are sweeping in daily hoping to help, but are instead hindering the progress and survival of the Haitian population by attempting to provide aid they are not qualified to provide. Volunteers and aid agencies are giving donations that are not needed, while taking resources, jobs, and business away from the community.

The largest necessity following disaster is not shoes, food, or even water, but communication and organization which ultimately facilitates the distribution of food, water, etc.. With open lines of effective communication, disaster relief efforts are certain to be more efficient, productive, equal, and effective; by improving all around knowledge of needs and plans to distribute.

Major groups from all over the world are attempting to be the “ring leader” of aid. Currently disaster relief efforts in Haiti are being controlled by The United States Military, The United Nations, The European Union, France, Netherlands, Canada, German, Iceland, Britain, Inter-American Development Bank, etc. (“Factbox: Countries, aid agencies helping Haiti” p. 1) Each organization has an agenda, resources, and a team dedicated to distribution. They are all missing the absolute most significant component which would make each group completely functional. Communication is that component. Communication with those needing the aid as well as communication with other groups distributing aid.

The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership or, HAP, conducted “The Listening Project” in which over 3,200 people were asked about being on the receiving end of aid. 13 different areas struck by natural disaster were heard (HAP International par 1). HAP provides information on the main concerns and perception of people on the recipient end of aid. The outcome was that recipients felt aid was more of an “industry” trying to get goods to people, and making no effort to develop relationships. To the aid recipients, how agencies provided assistance was more important than what the agencies provided. Communities are not able to select the agencies themselves, and

therefore their personal needs and agendas are different from what they are given. In the vast majority of situations recipients don’t even know what the agenda is of those providing aid.

Of the people interviewed by HAP, additional major concerns were aid organizations going too fast. Many recipients suggested that the organizations slow down. It was understood that volunteers and aid worker care and want to help, but failed to respect and listen to the recipients, sending a much different message of disrespect and lack of sincerity. Had recipients been listened to by aid agencies, the agencies would have realized that it is not the amount of aid distributed that is the problem, but how and where it is distributed. Recipients of aid further mentioned seeing significant amounts of mismanagement of aid resources in the aid system (“What the Listening Project has Learned par. 1-2). Mismanagement showing The Listening Projects findings, which make it clear; aid recipients feel and see a lack of communication, organization, and insufficient interest in the community’s personal feelings from aid agencies.

The communication between aid agencies and the people affected must become solid, ongoing, and



effective. It is needed for better organization and rapport with recipients. It is no surprise that aid distribution is creating chaos in it's current state.

To create effective, worthwhile, and infinite solutions, The U.N. seems to be most appropriate for the task. The United Nations mission statement states that the U.N. "supports international cooperation to achieve development for all, and assists governments in agenda-setting and decision-making on development issues at the global level (About DESA p.1)."

The U.N. must now access follow through on their mission to "support international cooperation to achieve development for all (About DESA p. 1)." The U.N. must take a stand and start making and implementing serious change. They can do so by launching, the Global Disaster Crew, whose purpose will be to facilitate complete effective communications prior to allowing donations, aid, or volunteers into a disaster area.

The potential of aid agencies withdrawing their donations or efforts as a whole as a result of a more complex system in which approval and denial is involved is a legitimate concern. Funding will be found in programs, such as Choice International, that charge well over \$3,000.00 for a volunteer to travel with a group to volunteer. Such groups will become a financial spine for relief efforts. It is these expensive agencies that people continue to pay in order to gain an international volunteer opportunity. To encourage agencies to continue providing humanitarian aid regardless of additional obstacles, free training's will be offered to all who maintain a consistent flow of donations/trained volunteers. Organizations who can provide documentation of success and progress in previous humanitarian aid missions will receive information sooner on arrival times as appropriate. This will give them the advantage of gathering aid and becoming more of the primary aid source. Allowing agencies to have people travel who can be helpful will benefit organizations by giving an additional tax cuts for U.S. Agencies, and employment waivers to be used on a reasonable staff to navigate through the requirements. Funding for this staff will be pulled partially from donations, however, hired staff must be internship

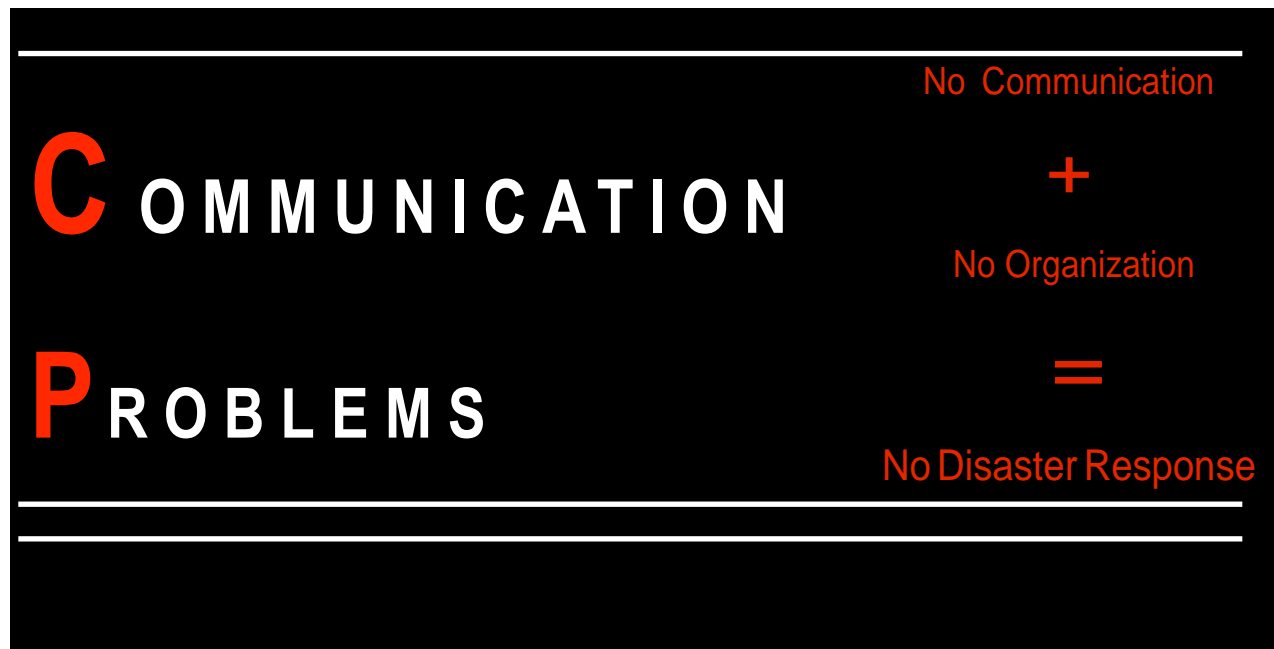
students from colleges across the globe. Basics needs, such as food, water, and methods of communication will be offered with housing similar to whatever the local people are, or will be living in. Interns will ideally get school credit rather than money, for their work.

Similar efforts have been made by "The Government and the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) have both launched concerted communication efforts to keep the UK public informed in the aftermath of the earthquake crisis in Haiti (Cartmell par. 1)." The program seems to be going well, however it is still isolated and unable to communicate effectively to other organizations outside of the U.K. Making it minimally effective, but a great outline for future humanitarian efforts.

Communication efforts that the "Core Survival Crew" will provide will demonstrate the much needed control over distribution and aid. Communication is a necessity to prevent further problems to an already struggling community. The benefits will be seen by eliminating signs of poor aid. Signs of poor aid include previous examples of failed aid relief efforts such as donations of coats to Thailand, a tropical area, when donated coats became street rubbish that the local sheep began eating which made the sheep sick and took away that resource from the community (Schimmelpennig par 3).

Humanity cannot afford further delays in effective aid. Without the communication and control of incoming items and aid efforts, many volunteers who are unprepared and ill equipped will continue to arrive unprepared presenting themselves as liabilities rather than a support. Properly trained volunteers and personnel should be trained before providing aid and it is mandatory we communicate this to potential donor, aid agencies, volunteers, etc.. They must understand safety, the language, the culture, and the needs voiced by the community members. Always remembering that a lack of communication leads to a lack of proper donations and will result in additional damage that can be prevented if we just communicate!





**A**id workers need better understanding of the culture before proceeding with disaster response. Hazard and chaos follows poorly or untrained aid workers and volunteers when they become useless and even impair the situation of disaster response further. Knowing and understanding the areas culture, language and social norms is crucial for efficient and effective aid. Well-being of locals suffers more as attempts in communicating concerns and needs further adds to frustrations and confusion. Workers having trouble understanding the language carry with them inability to understand needs for daily life as required in the community. With no one to tell you, in a way you understand, where the water/aid is you never find it. Inability to apprehend the language makes things more difficult and uncomfortable for volunteers and those directly affected by disaster, challenging the understanding of the culture and limiting trust typically gained through communication. The Listening Project reports on the survey of 3,200 aid recipients in noting “the relationships they [aid workers] make in that process [providing aid], is often more important to them that “what” agencies provide (Par. 2).” Differences in values and social norms build misconceptions while language comprehension hinders relationships with aid recipients, relationships that have proven to be a positive aspect of providing aid (par. 2-5).

Although we cannot speak Haitian, we relate to Haitians still. Seeing Haiti experience the same emotions we have and suffering extensively. Mostly gained from media, images of the tragedy grasp our sympathy, burdens our hearts, and triggers feelings of moral responsibility. The yearning to give and to help delegates impulses to act quickly and respond. Too quick of a response paralyzes efforts when agencies and organizations realize they can’t communicate with people to understand what is needed, where it’s needed, etc.

World Food Programme Executive Director Josette Sheeran said the January 12 Haiti earthquake was the “most complex challenge” the agency has confronted (qtd. in Basu p 2).” Sheeran also stated “Up until now the nature of this emergency has forced us to work in a ‘quick and dirty’ way simply to get food out (p 2).”

Humanistic qualities urging us to “save” people lead to unfortunate consequences and working in a ‘quick and dirty’ way makes Food and water distributions suffer greatly. In response to the question of why food and water distribution is failing in Haiti, Prime Minister Jean-Max-Bellerive stated “It’s still coordination” (Jane-Velez-Mitchell, CNN Spotlight). Coordination is made possible only by understanding the language and the inner workings of the culture. It is challenging, if not impossible to coordinate

humanitarian efforts if culture and language are not understood.

Inadequate language and cultural understandings may blind aid workers from much needed information, such as which areas are safe to be/distribute in. Information regarding safety and food distributions is communicated mostly in the local language. Recent information has warned both aid workers and recipients that World Food Programme spokesman Marcus Prior announced “Two distribution points, located in the dense slum of Cite Soleil, were a no-go for security reasons (qtd. in Basu p 1).”

Failure to understand the culture continues to create disaster by providing food people will not eat. During one food handout stones were thrown at U.N. Soldiers as tens of thousands of starving desperate people swarmed into the handout site, one man began shouting the food was no good, having misunderstood the packing date as the expiration date on energy biscuits (Delva par. 5-10).

As evidenced above, not only is it important for aid workers to understand culture and language, but donations of food and items should have labels recipients can read. Already appearing unfamiliar, food donations with English labels adds to the skepticism. “Haitian Food-Free-For-All” brings despairing reality to the eye of an outsider providing imagery of the cultures reaction to chaos. Intense confusion and disappointment experienced during the chaotic distribution of food, water, and medicine as thousands of people appear to engulf the area. Scaling nine industrial sized trucks. Each truck loaded with 225 rations of food including rice, beans, and oil. Rations which seem to instantly disappear into the hands of the most aggressive people (Karl Penhaul, CNN.com video). Cultural understanding, or at least a minimal understanding of human reactions when similar situations are presented.

Without the ability to speak the language volunteers may request inappropriate items which can be more than bad, but offensive. Misunderstandings seen when “canned pork and skimpy clothing was donated to Muslim communities without an understanding of the culture (Schimmelpfennig par. 3).” Not only do Muslims not eat pork, they won’t even sell it (Yomati’s HolyWords p 1)! As for the “skimpy” clothing, Muslims in the Islam culture are very modest. Prophet Muhammad instructed women who believe in the Qur’an to cover all of their bodies except for their face and hands (Huda par. 4). Similar inappropriate donations arrive constantly in disaster areas for years following



A man awaits help while trapped in rubble.

the disaster strictly because donors do not understand, or take the time to research the communities culture, beliefs, and values.

Cultural understanding ensures items that are needed are requested, and items are sent where and when they are needed. Trained response aid workers who do understand the culture and language, are able to show that they value the same thing the community does. Involving people in efforts to rebuild and keeping the locals informed keeps locals busy, gives them work, and gives them more independence.

Evidence of informed volunteers leaks through stories successfully aiming to appear full of hope and charity based on how the aid affects locals and the economy. Haven is an international development agency who claims they are “building homes for the people of

Haiti. The project is a building project - with 250 volunteers (Building Hope and Homes in Haiti par. 1).” At first glance the phrase “building homes for the people of Haiti” suggest that volunteers would be doing all the work. Leaving locals with an unfortunate, but frequent problem of continuous dependency on donors, a poor economy, and risks that homes may not even be homes Haitians would use. Fortunately, these legitimate concerns were addressed by the agency. Stating “The project builds homes and communities, by training, up-skilling and employing local Haitian people to build home all year round (Building Hope and Homes in Haiti par. 2).” Using locals to rebuild will provide a great advantage in the long run. Locals understand their culture and offer input on what does and does not work in a home in Haiti. Locals can also advise what local areas are realistic to build in with limited transportation. This approach will result in ideal and sustainable housing. Despite the benefits of understanding and working with locals some agencies fail to succeed.

Attempts at building housing for the Moken people failed to an extreme. Culture of the Moken people involves specific building methods. They build houses on tall stilts, using one corner as the bathroom (cracks in the floor allow for matter to fall through) the high tide then comes in refuse is washed away with each high tide

(Schimmelpfennig p 2). Failure to address cultural norms became a problem. New housing was further from the shore line, and bathrooms units were attached to the back of houses. The Moken people continued with their cultural norms, using a corner in the house as a bathroom. “The high tide could no longer wash away the refuse, leading to problems with insects and concerns over sanitation (p 2).”

The Listening Project reveals that communities often times do not get to select the agencies who work within their communities and have not been included enough to know what the agenda of organizations is (The Listening Project par.2). Aid recipients stated aid agencies should “invest the necessary time”, “go more slowly”, and “listen to people”, in order to “learn about the real circumstances (par. 3).” It is apparent that people would rather wait to receive aid than to receive unorganized, unnecessary, or inappropriate aid. People want to be heard and understood. Providing aid recipients with what they really need, rather than what we perceive they need, is accomplishable with cultural understanding with the ability to build relationships and language skills efficient enough to both speak, and listen to recipients.



A woman cradles her injured child in a makeshift hospital



Recipients of aid know what they need; they need aid workers to facilitate some of it for them, a situation which student Jimmy can relate to. Jimmy currently attends Salt Lake Community College, volunteers with Red Cross, and is a survivor of three separate natural disasters including two Hawaiian hurricanes and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Jimmy commented on how he felt about the disaster aid he received as well as the aid he wishes he had received. The issue of donations being accepted, but not what was needed was observed in his experiences. Donors did not understand the culture and their desire to rebuild and gain independence again. Jimmy stated tools to rebuild roads would have been more beneficial and provided work for



locals. The roads would enable more efficient distribution of goods, and build a moral support system within the community. Jimmy mentioned memories of the community coming together as a whole and building strong emotional bonds while rebuilding their community. A common understanding of what was important, what needed to be done, who was available that could do it, and smooth communication evolved into success. Jimmy's genuine appreciation for the organized fashion in which the National Guard, FEMA, and the Red Cross distributed aid was evident from his eagerness to explain the success. Jimmy also expressed verbally his appreciation for the organization and seemingly smooth response from aid the National Guard, FEMA, and the Red Cross provided (Jimmy, SLCC Redwood south Balcony). Not everyone is able to experience the effective aid Jimmy did. Haiti, is one of those unfortunate places. Sadly, we are making it worse.

One organization who demonstrates poor communication is Utah Haiti Relief Organization run by Dan Gardner and Jeremy Johnson who arrived in Haiti unannounced with 3 helicopters full of goods to distribute. Their intentions were clearly to help and to serve. "When we came we didn't really know exactly what the mission would be (Dan Gardner)" Gardner and Johnson should have arranged communication with people in Haiti and developed relationships with them. The demeaning nature in which they conducted their food distribution did not follow any of the requests demonstrated above by The Listening Project.

Gardner and his team fly helicopters to open areas to distribute food. Once out of the helicopter they slash several cuts into large bags of beans set on the ground and run back to the helicopter. In less than seconds people are attacking the bag and digging through the rubble on the ground picking out every last bean. This distribution is dangerous and in no way communicates with locals.

Tens of thousands of organizations are set up worldwide to provide aid. Donors and volunteers mean well and typically have a genuine passion to help. Unintended negative results referred to as "learning opportunities" should be reduced and eventually eliminated. This is a goal that is possible if agencies and organizations keep the previously mentioned two principles with them at all times. 1: Understand the culture including the language. 2: Do not provide aid without talking to several locals about the needs first. This will prevent further issues and aid will be far more appreciated by recipients who, because of understanding and communication, got what they needed. So as we volunteer we may feel better, but not knowing how to communicate in the local language, and understand the culture and needs, places us as nuisances. No matter how great the feeling is that we may have helped, if we fail to communicate and understand, it is not worth the extreme repercussion that follows and continues to ripple long after we leave.

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