

Please Don't Send Your Old Shoes to the Philippines

Survivors of Typhoon Haiyan need your help. But send money, not your hand-me-downs.

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Photo by Romeo Ranoco/Reuters



Volunteers in Manila pack relief goods inside a Department of Social Welfare and Development warehouse before shipping out to devastated provinces hit by Typhoon Haiyan.

Typhoon Haiyan is one of the strongest storms ever to make landfall and [its impact for Filipinos has been devastating](#). Current U.N. and Philippine government estimates indicate more than 9.5 million people are affected by the typhoon in nine regions across the country. Additionally, nearly 620,000 people have been displaced from their homes and communities. All of this comes on top of displacement as a result of fighting in September and the Bohol earthquake of

Oct. 15. The humanitarian response is stretched and needs support.

I've been a humanitarian aid worker for a long time, and [have even written a book about my experience](#). After a disaster like Typhoon Haiyan, I'm usually the person to whom friends and family members turn to ask, "How can I help?" Wanting to help victims of a massive disaster is a human instinct that should be lauded. But unfortunately, well-meaning people repeatedly get it wrong. And this time around it seems that some are already responding in unsuitable ways. Updates have begun littering my Facebook wall from well-intentioned Americans: "On the way to local Filipino Market. With clothes and food ... Come on, go through your closets and make a stop at your market. They need food, detergent, canned goods, soap. They need flip flops. Any old shoes you don't want."

The responses are coming in: "Terrific idea. Making my way there now."

And another: "Good to know. Cleaning out my closet as I write this."

Americans are exceptionally generous in the wake of an emergency. After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Americans donated more than \$1.4 billion to relief and recovery efforts; they donated \$1.6 billion after the 2004 South Asian tsunami. But often these very humane instincts—to help people after a massive disaster—result in inappropriate donations that can actually do much more harm than good. Here's why.

Donate money—not teddy bears, not old shoes, not breast milk.

After the tsunami, similarly well-intentioned people cleaned out their closets, sending boxes of "any old shoes" and other clothing to the countries. I was there after the tsunami and saw what happened to these clothes: Heaps of them were left lying on the side of the road. Cattle began picking at them and getting sick. Civil servants had to divert their limited time to eliminating the unwanted clothes. Sri Lankans and Indonesians found it degrading to be shipped people's hand-me-downs. I remember a local colleague sighed as we passed the heaps of clothing on the sides of the road and said "I know people mean well, but we're not beggars." Boxes filled with Santa costumes, 4-inch high heels, and cocktail dresses landed in tsunami-affected areas. In

some places, open tubes of Neosporin, Preparation H, and Viagra showed up. The aid community has coined a term for these items that get shipped from people's closets and medicine cabinets as SWEDOW—Stuff We Don't Want.

Right now, access to people affected by the disaster is a major challenge facing the aid community in the Philippines. According to the most recent U.N. Situation Report, resources to deliver relief goods are extremely limited. Roundtrip travel on the [11-kilometer road which connects the airport to the city of Tacloban](#) currently takes about six hours; it is the only cleared road, according to the U.N. The airport's air traffic control and fuel storage facility were damaged. Consider what happens when a plane full of unwanted donations is competing for runway space with planes carrying needed medicines and food items. Someone has to unload those donations, someone needs to sort through them for customs, someone needs to truck them to affected areas which are hard to reach anyway and where there's a limited supply of fuel. When old shoes and clothes are sent from the U.S., they just waste people's time and slow down getting lifesaving medicines and food to affected people.

“Dumping” goods into areas of need also puts local vendors out of business at a time when they need their businesses to recover most. Your son's old Nikes may put a smile on the face of a child for an instant, but you've now undermined his father who sells shoes in the local market, and who is trying to regain his livelihood to help put that same child through school.

The good-hearted American response to disaster can border on the absurd. After the Haiti earthquake American mothers pumped and donated hundreds of ounces of breast milk, meant for mothers who may have stopped lactating due to the trauma. I remember the response of the nutrition manager of the agency I was working for when the call came that the plane had arrived: “Great. What am I supposed to do with this stuff now?” Nutritionists specifically work to help mothers lactate again. If they are given supplementary breast milk, that supply will eventually run out and mothers will no longer be able to lactate. They'll typically end up feeding children foods they can't easily digest—like rice—or unclean water which will make the babies sick. Additionally, breast milk needs to be kept cold—a challenge in places where there's limited electricity and not much in the way of refrigeration.

There is one simple way that people who want to help can help. *Donate money—not teddy bears, not old shoes, not breast milk.* Give money to organizations that have worked in the affected areas before the storm—they will be more likely to know and be able to navigate the local context and may be able to respond faster, as it won't take them time to set up. Give money to agencies that are able to articulate what the actual needs are and transparently tell you how they are responding. Give money to agencies that are procuring items locally to help rebuild the economy. Give money to agencies that are working with the government to ensure that their response is aligned with the national response.

The Philippines has a highly developed civil society sector and effective government disaster response authority. Although Typhoon Haiyan has overwhelmed local capacity for now, their local efforts should be supported. The Philippines Red Cross has already worked to rescue individuals and deliver lifesaving goods to people in hard-to-reach places. Other Philippines-based organizations such as [Community and Family Services International](#) and the [Philippine Red Cross](#) will know the local needs and how best to respond.

Americans are extremely charitable, and their generosity is recognized by people overseas time and time again. These impulses should be channeled to places that can do the most with the generosity. If you insist on giving something other than money, don't assume you know what the needs are from afar. Wait for an organization that is in the Philippines to solicit specific items. After all, isn't that what you would want if it happened in your community?