



Op-Ed: Aaron Davy: How misdirected kindness can hamper aid

Goods sent through the generosity of the public in response to an emergency is not a new phenomenon. However the history of emergency responses similar to the Samoa measles epidemic includes numerous examples of how uncoordinated public generosity can sometimes lead to further costs for an already hurting impacted community.

During this season of open-heartedness, let us imagine for a moment being the parent of unwell children in a household that is already feeling the strain of holiday demands. Generous neighbours, friends and those genuinely concerned respond and spread the word of your request for help. Through the power of community networks and social media, your plea for assistance goes further and wider than even you intended.

One morning, after another sleepless night you open your curtains to find your view blocked by numerous shipping containers sent by kind but unknown secret-Santas. Your front lawn is now filled with things you do not require. What you yearned for was rest, time and transportation support ...what you received were teddy-bears, balloons and crock-pots.

This is often the reality for Pacific neighbours, when they open up some of the shipping containers sent by well-meaning New Zealanders following a humanitarian crisis or emergency.

New Zealanders are generous people, and we want to help; it is what we all do when a crisis strikes and the lives of our neighbours and friends are at risk. However, our well-meaning actions can sometimes do more harm than good.

Following Tropical Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu in 2015, over 70 shipping containers of publically donated, but unrequested, goods landed on the wharfs of Port Vila. One year later, 18 of these containers still remained unprocessed, costing Vanuatu authorities over \$2million in lost revenue and space.

In 2016, following Tropical Cyclone Winston in Tonga and Fiji, over 130 shipping containers of goods, along with over 8,000 pieces of loose cargo were received. The volume of unneeded items measured nearly 85,000 m³; that's enough to fill over 33 Olympic sized swimming pools. Thankfully no actual Olympic sized swimming pools were in fact sent, but inappropriate goods such as high heels, woolly jumpers and snow-skis did arrive. Perishable food items, of which over 50% quickly required dumping, were also donated.

The response to tropical cyclones is different from the response needed for a public-health emergency, such as the Samoa measles epidemic. One constant, however, is that providing the wrong form of assistance can slow down the recovery from a crisis, and can even cause further harm.

Many items being sent over are in fact available to be purchased closer to where they are needed. The flooding of local markets with donated goods can further undermine an already struggling local economy. Unneeded donated goods also take up much-needed space, time and resources in warehouses. Locals are often left with the bill for Customs duties that sometimes cost more than the unneeded contents itself. Shipping containers also take time to unload and sort, and can hold up supplies of the most immediate needs. Over 60% of unsolicited goods sent to a disaster zone ends up in landfill.

This is where New Zealand's humanitarian response professionals come in. UNICEF is providing vaccines and immunisation support, while Save the Children has sent a medical team including Midwives. Caritas has provided hospital equipment and transportation support and, along with Christian World Service and The Family Centre, providing culturally appropriate psychosocial counselling. ADRA is providing meals for staff and the public at health centres, while Rotary is also providing bereavement support, equipment and additional beds to health centres and hospitals.

In the current measles epidemic, these New Zealand charities are at the forefront and working alongside Samoan community organisations and leaders. These are the people who know what the most immediate need is. But New Zealand organisations can only deliver their expert assistance if their work is adequately funded. So the most urgent need in times of crisis is money, and no other type of donation can match its impact!

Cash is best because it allows local communities and authorities to determine their own priority needs, and to meet those needs by purchasing through local markets. Nothing can transform into what people need the most as rapidly as cash can. Cash can also get to a disaster zone (or public-health emergency) directly, without further clogging logistic supply-chains.

We know not everyone can afford to donate money, but there are many ways to convert your goodwill into effective aid. Goods can be donated to a New Zealand charity shop. A fundraising event can be organised with raised funds donated to a New Zealand international charity.

In New Zealand, international charities that belong to the Council for International Development must verify their practice with a Code of Compliance that ensures full transparency and accountability for the public donations that they collect. Through this, New Zealanders can hold trust in their chosen charity honouring their promise to the donor, and be confident their donation is being used responsibly.

Be it festive season or otherwise, the generosity of New Zealanders should be honoured. If a disaster happens and you really want to help, contact a professional New Zealand humanitarian charity, and donate or send cash. You can find a complete list of respected and experienced organisations on the Council for International Development website at www.cid.org.nz.

We do not want to dissuade New Zealanders from acting on their awesome generosity during a crisis. This support is critical; it is also critical that we all act on the right information to ensure the right aid response. The public can then be confident that their kind actions are having the most efficient and effective impact for the community in need.

For delivering immediate lifesaving support to families that need it, donated cash is not delayed or left sitting in a shipping container on a wharf. If you are donating to an emergency this Christmas or the coming year, don't let your *'goodwill to all men'* end up in landfill overseas.

Aaron Davy is the Standards & Humanitarian Manager for the Council for International Development, an umbrella organisation for New Zealand's international non-government organisations.