

**INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE-WORKING GROUP
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INAPPROPRIATE IN-KIND DONATIONS

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem of inappropriate in kind donations persists. Recent disasters such as the earthquake in Turkey and the floods in Venezuela and Mozambique once again exposed the problem. The governments of these countries as well as the humanitarian NGOs were faced with the traditional scene of sorting out medicine, food and clothing sent in boxes, plastic bags and paper parcels with no label or list of contents.

Many of us are familiar with tragic-comic examples of unsolicited goods that are not needed, requested, useful or wanted. We have heard stories such as the 1kg-rice bags collected in French schools last year that were all mixed together in bigger containers to facilitate the transport; a logical step, had the grains not required different cooking times.

We acknowledge that it is unrealistic to expect people not to send what they have in their closets and companies what they have stoked away in their warehouses. But we must find a way to alleviate the harmful consequences of inappropriate and unsolicited in-kind donations.

WHO immediately sees two fronts to tackle the problem: a preventive and a responsive one.

PREVENTIVE APPROACH

A well-intentioned public responding to tragic scenes of people that lose family and homes, donated those items. It is a voluntary and spontaneous reaction that has little to do with response to a declaration of need from interested governments. A significant volume of those non-solicited goods repeatedly competes for storage space, transport, and handling time, with items of greater need.

The main questions are:

1. How do we convince individuals that some items are not necessary when they are watching tragic images relayed from the disaster site?
2. How can we convert counterproductive, reactive behavior into well-informed constructive action?

WHO believes that an efficient way of approaching a generous but ill-informed public in communities of the donor countries is through a massive education campaign.

First, to educate the general public, focus should be placed on information related to the actual needs of the victims, instruction given on the unintentional consequences of some donations, and successful contributions fully and clearly explained. Although there is consensus that the best donation is cash, this message is not enough. It is not enough to say what is not needed. We must say what is needed, and why it is needed. The public needs to be given the elements to make an informed choice.

Secondly, the right time to inform the public on the negative impact of their neighborhood collection is not when disaster strikes and people are anxiously seeking transportation for the collected goods. **The time is before the disaster.** The challenge is to change the behavior of people.

The vaccination campaigns, are examples of the effectiveness of such campaigns. They have shown us that the public responds to repetitive messages. After an initial intensive campaign, an annual reminder in the form of public service announcements on television, newspapers, and radios have guaranteed the continuous success of vaccination days. Similarly, the message on donations will need to be repeated, for instance, at the onset of hurricane season or immediately after a major disaster.

CONCRETE STEPS

We are recommending the members of IASC to join forces and establish a joint mechanism to make this campaign a reality. Together we can:

- Dedicate the World Disaster Reduction Day of 2002 to appropriate donations, and use it as a platform to launch a global action;
- Develop a common message, a message that conveys the position of humanitarian organizations and local communities;
- Organize a massive media campaign to raise awareness of the problem among governments and public opinion;
- Distribute leaflets with primary steps on how to be an efficient donor;
- Mobilize funds for this campaign.

RESPONSIVE APPROACH

In the aftermath of a disaster, when many organizations are mobilizing supplies to respond to the event, and airports or harbors are clogged with all sorts of donations, there is a definite need for a joint information system to manage solicited and unsolicited supplies. In any disaster the agency in charge (be it the local government or the UN) need information on what is available for response regardless of agency ownership of the commodities. SUMA, a supply management system, attempts to respond to that. It allows for a more efficient response by standardizing information exchange among agencies. Additionally, it does not compromise the internal management tools of each agency. SUMA permits:

1. Registering non-food supplies arriving in the country;
2. Classifies not only health supplies but also other technically most challenging categories;
3. Priority setting for the distribution of the supplies differentiating, for instance, between needed items and useless, non-solicited donations;
4. Inventory reports at any given moment;
5. Stock management for small agencies that do not have their own tools.

It has been in use and in constant development since 1992. In East Timor, it once more proved to be a valuable instrument.

WHO suggests:

- Endorsement by the IASC of the need for a joint information inventory of non-food items.
- Joint revision and adaptation of SUMA to better respond to the needs of the different agencies when engaged in the response to natural disasters or complex emergency missions.

CONCLUSION

Inappropriate in-kind donations are a challenge for the delivery of efficient response to victims of disasters, by the members of IASC. In this brief document WHO argues for a preventive and a corrective approach to tackle the issue. It proposes concrete and straightforward steps. These ideas are presented here to IASC-Working Group for appreciation and support.