Humanitarian Needs

Relief aid refers to the provision of essential, appropriate and timely humanitarian assistance to those affected by a disaster, based on an initial rapid assessment of needs and designed to contribute effectively and speedily to their early recovery. It consists of the delivery of a specific quantity and quality of goods to a quantified group of beneficiaries, according to selection criteria that identify actual needs and the groups that are least able to provide for themselves.

Relief aid can be subdivided into the following categories:

Food

It is essential in each situation to first establish that food supply is a correct response and then that the composition is defined and described after an adequate comprehensive survey. In every instance, it is necessary to ensure that food donations are culturally and nutritionally appropriate for the affected population and that the costs of their purchase, transportation, storage and distribution is kept to a minimum.

Food assistance will not be needed where disasters have no major effect on food stocks or crops, or where the effect is very localised, and when people are able to draw on their own savings or food reserves.

Shelter

Shelter is a critical determinant for survival in the initial stages of a disaster. Beyond survival, shelter is necessary for security and personal safety, protection from the elements and resistance to ill health and disease. Shelter assistance is provided to individual households for the repair or construction of dwellings or the settlement of displaced households within existing accommodation or communities. When it is not possible to provide individual shelter, collective shelter is provided in suitably large public buildings or structures, such as warehouses, halls or barracks, or in temporary planned or self-settled camps.

Non-food items

When people have lost everything in a disaster, they require basic and culturally appropriate goods and supplies to maintain their health, privacy and dignity, to meet their personal hygiene needs, to prepare and eat food and to achieve necessary levels of thermal comfort. These might include clothing, blankets, bedding, stoves and kitchen sets, water containers and hygiene products.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion

The lack of access to safe water and sanitation facilities is a major cause of death, disease and loss of dignity in most of the world's poorer countries.

Over 1.1 billion people do not have access to clean water and more than 2.6 billion people do not have access to basic sanitation. More than 2 million people, the majority children under 5, die every year due to a lack of improved water sources and basic sanitation.

The problems caused by a lack of access to safe water and sanitation are made much worse during disasters and crises, and are increasingly influenced by climate change, rapid unplanned urbanisation, increasing epidemics and pandemics, population movement and conflict. Lack of safe water is the most common and preventable underlying cause of disease and death in the world today.

Health in Emergencies

Emergencies, both natural and humanitarian (arising from political strife or conflict) have major consequences on the health of affected populations. Children and women are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition, disease and violence. In the past decade, an estimated 2 million children have died as a result of armed conflict alone. This is largely due to the interruption of existing health and social services. This is often compounded by population displacement, lack of access to food and other essential commodities, overcrowding, and poor water and sanitation facilities. Excess morbidity and mortality thus results from the indirect causes of conflict or natural disasters, such as malnutrition and communicable diseases.
Cash and Voucher Programs:

The type of emergency assistance required after a disaster is often easy to identify (for instance, earthquake, flood and hurricane victims almost always need emergency shelter). How it is delivered to the intended beneficiaries can make a huge difference to their level of vulnerability, by allowing them to gain more control of their lives and improving their survival chances. Large-scale emergency response often relies heavily on the channelling of emergency aid from outside the affected area, requiring significant logistics, infrastructure and human resources. Sometimes this can increase vulnerability by stifling local coping mechanisms (for example, by fostering dependency) and undermining local markets. In some cases, urgently needed relief items can be bought locally and do not have to be brought in from outside.

In certain circumstances, therefore, a more appropriate, efficient and effective way of delivering emergency aid might be to distribute vouchers (to be exchanged for a limited range of essential items) or even cash to victims of disasters, where local markets are able to provide the required items. This method of assistance has the advantages of being relatively inexpensive to implement (hence more money can go directly to the beneficiaries); more flexible for the beneficiaries, since they can choose what to spend the money on; and supportive of the local economy.

In practice, voucher or cash programs can have drawbacks. The distribution of cash presents security risks for both the distributing agency and the recipient. Such programs are most secure where recipients have a bank account (not always the case in many countries). In addition, the cash or voucher must be given to the right person in the family to ensure it is used for essential purchases. The control of family resources is a social, cultural, religious and gender issue, which needs to be taken into account in the planning of voucher or cash programmes. Voucher programs usually take a certain amount of time to set up administratively, making them of limited use at the beginning of the emergency phase.