



Want to Help Ukrainian Refugees? Don't Send Random Stuff

An open letter urging well-intentioned donors to think twice before inadvertently doing more harm than good.

I am sure your heart bleeds as you witness the suffering of the brave Ukrainian people. You feel the urge to help. You may even start a collection effort, putting stuff in boxes and organising transport to the field. At least you would feel useful by “doing something”.

But is it a good idea? Are you sure it is the best way to support the relief operation? Do you know where the people in need are and what they need most when on the road or in refugee camps? Is there someone at the other end who will accept your shipment and can easily distribute the items to the beneficiaries? Does that organisation know exactly what you are sending and are the items packaged in the right quantities to allow for easy distribution? If your answer to some of these questions is no, please read on.

People on the move do not need 10-litre water bottles or six-packs of 1.5-litre bottles. They will take one or two bottles they can carry and throw the rest away. Are you sure that clothes, children’s toys, medicines, cookies, pasta and toothpaste are what they really need?

What happens to unsolicited donations

The receiving organisation will need to inspect your boxes of mixed items, assess them for suitability

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(e.g. remove perished drugs or food items) and repackage the useful items so that they can easily be distributed. Items that are not immediately useful or outright useless may have to be stored, occupying scarce and hence expensive warehouse capacity.

All this requires time and effort. Surely, the people in the field are working under pressure with very little resources and have more critical things to do than dealing with random shipments. Therefore, chances are that nobody is eager to accept truckloads of goods.

Often, these goods are dumped along the road where food items rot and invite rodents. In turn, the disposal of these useless unsolicited donations requires extra time and resources.

To add to this dire situation, the large number of vehicles bringing donated items to the crisis area creates traffic jams and may hinder efficient distribution of urgent necessities to the people. Perhaps all the refugees need is security and housing (tents), some blankets, as well as some food and water – a semblance of safety and stability after a nerve-wracking and perilous experience.

The second disaster

The phenomenon described above is known as

“material convergence” created by unsolicited donations. It is well-known and recurrent in major disasters that evoke emotional reactions in people who then feel the urge to act by sending stuff. Humanitarian professionals call it the “second disaster” since it **complicates their work greatly**.

It is already happening in the current Ukrainian crisis as reported in Scandinavian media. In Norway, individual donors and small organisations pack masses of clothing, lumped with used beds, toys and hygiene items – you name it. Just imagine the amount of waste piling up when all of these arrive at the disaster sites.

It is ironic and perhaps tragic that well-intentioned emotional reactions to “do something” by collecting and shipping unsolicited items can create such adverse effects and even make matters worse. By now you must (understandably) be upset and my next question may not pacify you, but please bear with me. Is your goal truly to maximise assistance to the people in need or rather, largely to help you feel good by proactively “doing something”? The very first principle of humanitarian action is to “do no harm”. Surely, doing harm is the last of your intentions. So please think twice before you act.

What to do instead

The best course of action is to give money to trusted humanitarian organisations like the Red Cross. They know exactly what is needed and where. They also know where to procure the items and how to distribute them efficiently and swiftly. They are experts in humanitarian logistics. You aren’t.

If you still insist on sending items (which may be more expensive and inefficient), please be sure to connect with bona fide organisations which can tell you exactly what they need and how to package the goods so they can be easily distributed. Do not send “n’importe quoi” you collected. Toothpaste, old clothes and broken children’s toys may very well be the last things on their list.

These insights on the huge logistical problems created by unsolicited donations are based on a large body of research and field visits after several major disasters. In the past 20 years, I have done research and **published extensively on these issues** with the Humanitarian Research Group in INSEAD and wonderful colleagues like Jose Holguin-Veras, a professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY. I have at times been called a pioneer. And yet, I hesitated a long time before writing this piece.

What convinced me to write it was the hope that I could perhaps persuade some of you to reflect upon the potential consequences of your well-intentioned

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actions. As mentioned, the best way to help is to give money to a trusted humanitarian organisation that needs it and knows best how to use it. If I have managed to change the minds of some of you, I shall consider it as my minuscule personal contribution.

The infamous “new normal”

Covid-19 and the Ukrainian conflict confronted us with the brutal fact that complex protracted crises are perhaps becoming the new normal. Research in logistics and supply chain management to better absorb the impact of these crises is important for the victims as well as for companies and economies.

Not only do we need to learn how to deal with major crises, but we also need to find ways to improve our systems. These crises should be opportunities to rethink our “business models” and become more resilient.

Another important area for research relates to the question of equity. It is moving to see the warm welcome and support given to the Ukrainian refugees, but what about the people who were blocked at the borders in the cold with guns pointed at them only a few months ago? Are some people “more equal than others”, to quote George Orwell?

The same question holds for access to vaccines. Asking the question is answering it. You are out of luck if you are a poor person living in Africa.

Putting the spotlight back on the incredibly courageous Ukrainians, they badly need our help and support. Too many have lost their homes and their chance at a normal life. Even worse, too many refugees have left behind their fathers, husbands, sons, brothers and friends, who are risking their lives to face a much larger and ruthless aggressor. Our thoughts should be with them, as well as our prayers, and we should do our very best to help. There is no doubt about that.

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