
Hard to Do, Easy to Criticise: How (Not) to Respond to a Humanitarian Crisis



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Recognising post-disaster realities can enable individuals, media and organisations to help the Turkey-Syria earthquake victims more effectively.

The world continues to watch in horror as the aftermath of the Turkey-Syria earthquakes unfolds in the media. In the early days, reports of the “failed humanitarian response” to the disaster were already circulating, with journalists on the ground reporting that “aid has not yet arrived” to remote areas. Such reports elicited emotional reactions from viewers, some outraged by the lack of immediate humanitarian response in delivering aid to huge populations in distress.

But this is no ordinary disaster, and the reality is that “immediate” does not come easy for humanitarian organisations.

The sheer magnitude of the earthquakes (measuring 7.7 and 7.6 on the Richter scale), combined with the extremely shallow epicentres, led to the deadliest natural disaster in the region in modern times. The first quake's impact is estimated to be equivalent to **130 atomic bombs**. The affected area is over 135,000 km² (about twice the size of Belgium and the Netherlands combined) and is a region experiencing political tensions (both within and between countries). The area was home to more than 18 million people. The affected population within Turkish territory alone is larger than the population of entire countries such as Austria, Belgium, Greece, Portugal, Serbia, Sweden and Switzerland.

Probabilistically, the series of disasters may well be what is known as a “black swan event” – an extreme and unexpected event with catastrophic consequences. Even in the rosier of scenarios, where rescue teams were on site and ready to be deployed and all the required aid prepared and ready to be distributed by a fleet on standby, it would take days or weeks to conduct the rescue mission and deliver aid across such an exceptionally large area.

The reality of humanitarian operations

In reality, none of these rosy, perfect conditions for humanitarian operations exist – and they seldom do. Instead, the reality that humanitarian workers meet on the ground are destroyed airports, roads and bridges, while congestion and material convergence – a common post-disaster phenomenon where donated items choke critical transport networks – often plague the disaster area.

In the first week after a large-scale earthquake, the main tasks of humanitarian teams are to rescue survivors and treat the wounded, and then respond as quickly as possible to their needs for food, medicine, security and shelter in the ensuing months.

At a high level, rescue and response efforts firstly involve needs assessment to determine what, where and how much is needed. These may include rescue teams, relief items such as medical kits, food and tents, ground and air fleet for transportation and rescue work, equipment and medical centres. In spite of their best efforts, needs assessment right after an earthquake may be far from accurate. Accuracy can only be improved as teams are deployed in the field to evaluate the situation in different areas. But this takes time.

Next, required assets and resources need to be matched with what's available to identify gaps. In the immediate period following the disaster, fleet and equipment are usually lacking as it takes time to deploy them to the areas in most need. There tends to be a shortage of manpower for search and rescue efforts to recover people from under the rubble, operate vehicles, distribute aid and help the injured. Moreover, detailed coordination is required to ensure both manpower and equipment are available at the same time. As an obvious example, having volunteer doctors without medical kits is not helpful.

Even if resources or equipment were available prior to the disaster, they may not be located where they are most needed, given the unpredictability of the earthquake and the level of destruction. As expected, access is often limited in areas ravaged by natural disasters, and it can be difficult for help to reach people in need. It may simply be very hard or near-impossible to get to the hardest-hit areas.

In fact, the airport in Hatay – one of the hardest-hit cities – was not operational, preventing direct airfreight into the area. Two other major airports were also closed to civil flights. Humanitarian workers on the ground need to conduct field assessments to determine which transport routes can still be used, whether debris removal is required to clear blocked roads and if deployment of air transport is needed.

Compounding challenges

As expected, almost all affected cities experienced water, power, gas and fuel shortages due to infrastructural damage or preventative measures. This doesn't only mean a lack of access to basic necessities but can lead to a health and sanitation crisis if not properly managed.

Other than physical access, communication channels were interrupted. Coordination within and between different areas requires managing various rescue teams, humanitarian organisations, resources and assets. This is already challenging in normal situations but becomes extremely difficult when communication is disrupted.

Importantly, international humanitarian operations can only start with the permission and coordination from the government, but bureaucracy can create a bottleneck and delay operations. Governments may also force rescue and relief operations to be centralised for reasons ranging from public

relations to better coordination, which may slow down or even prevent international humanitarian aid from reaching the affected areas. The fact that the affected areas have weakened and at times non-functioning institutions makes coordination even more challenging for humanitarian operations.

Humanitarian principles can be difficult to maintain in large disasters that span vast regions and different countries. When military forces are one of the major actors, bureaucracy in deployment is beyond the control of humanitarian organisations. In fact, humanitarian workers tread a fine line to stay within the bounds and still deliver the much-needed aid. In this case when the affected area includes the politically sensitive border between Turkey and Syria, it is even more crucial – but also more difficult – to maintain neutrality and impartiality.

Finally, over-zealous sympathisers can create a “second disaster” when they donate unsolicited items that significantly increase logistical challenges. The huge influx of **in-kind donations** – which rarely match actual needs, practical packaging or forms – can lead to congestion and material convergence, especially when access is already limited. Monetary aid is preferred, although an immediate translation of funds to aid is equally unrealistic. It takes time to raise monetary donations and to convert funds to aid.

The sensitive role of the media

The media plays an important role in raising global awareness of the scale of any disaster, which clearly can translate to much-needed aid and donations. Yet the media’s role is a delicate one given their power to influence and incredible reach.

Reporters have privileged access to disaster sites, but the taxis and helicopters they used to get there are scarce resources that could be deployed to deliver aid or for assessing humanitarian needs. Therefore this “privilege” should ideally be used to do good – or at least to minimise harm.

In the short-term, not doing harm could simply mean limiting the use of scarce transport and ideally, they should only access disaster sites if it does not burden the work of humanitarian groups. In the long-term, because donor sensitivity is at the peak right after a disaster, negative press that points fingers at rescue and recovery efforts can pare down donations

needed for the massive reconstruction efforts required.

Instead, it is important to paint an accurate picture of the harsh realities on the ground: that it takes time to mobilise the huge logistical machine necessary to bring in international support and start a full-blown response operation. In the meantime, a lot of help must come from local communities and organisations.

Some local journalists have even gone above and beyond their responsibility to access people in need and direct rescue teams towards them. In this way, media acts as the voice of the people when they needed but could not get aid. Some people were able to locate their relatives through the local reporters thanks to the incredible reach of broadcasts.

Hope and support can go together

The magnitude of the relief operations, like the magnitude of the earthquakes, is colossal. The resulting death toll is expected to top **50,000** but may even **exceed 180,000** (the latter would put this earthquake among the deadliest in a century). The people of Turkey and Syria – and the world that has been watching the catastrophe in disbelief – are hoping for miracles. But what's also needed is recognition of the realities – the complexities of relief operations at such a scale.

There is of course no fault in hoping but, at the same time, it is not fair to expect miracles from humanitarian workers who risk their lives, sometimes working 24 hours a day in extremely difficult and overwhelming circumstances. Considering the scale of the disaster and the challenging realities on the ground, they deserve our understanding and respect, if not our support. Driven by purpose instead of monetary rewards, they must believe in creating miracles too.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/hard-do-easy-criticise-how-not-respond-humanitarian-crisis>

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