

# Humanitarian disaster response: How to 'do no harm'



## DO NO HARM

*Inappropriate humanitarian disaster responses can inadvertently do more harm than good.*

For example, while responding to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the UN peacekeeping forces failed to treat water sources for cholera. The outbreak caused the death of thousands of Haitians, prompting demonstrations, rioting, road blockades, and clashes between protestors and UN troops in Haiti. The Haitian police were called in to protect the UN troops, who were accused of spreading the water-borne disease.



## Be climate sensitive

**Failure to consider the links between disaster responses, environmental resources, and climate change can increase the risk of conflict by damaging the natural resource base that communities rely on.**

For example, the livelihoods of fishermen in eastern Sri Lanka were undermined after the Indian Ocean tsunami by the delivery of too many fishing boats, which led to overfishing.



## Conflict responses must be 'disaster smart'

**Disaster-blind conflict interventions, such as poorly planned resettlement programs, can reinforce disaster risks.** In Sudan, the growth of internally displaced persons (IDP) camps increased pressure on limited resources. International humanitarian agencies cut down trees for timber to build the camps. The resulting deforestation led to loss of fertile topsoil and exacerbated water scarcity. The unsustainable use of timber and water increased the already fragile livelihoods of the millions affected by conflict.

## Distribute aid equitably and avoid exacerbating inequalities



**Humanitarian responses can exacerbate pre-existing inequalities or create new ones by unequally distributing aid.**

In Pakistan, NGOs responding to the floods of July-August 2010 distributed aid unevenly due to a lack of coordination and a complex security situation. Even within the same village, relief packages differed widely, raising tensions both within the community and with the NGOs (*Street* 2012). Following the 2010 Haiti earthquake, people living immediately outside of the relief camps objected to the disparity in services between the camps and neighbouring communities.



## Don't assume responses are politically neutral in fragile situations

**By assuming that humanitarian efforts are immune to political manipulation, aid workers may inadvertently cause harm, exacerbating grievances in places where state-citizen relations are already fragile.**

Requiring humanitarian assistance to be channelled through the state can marginalize certain groups or factions of society that are in conflict with the government, as in post-tsunami Sri Lanka.