

Nov 04, 2016 by [Tori Horton](#)

Responding to Natural Disasters with Humanitarian Aid: Implications for Public Diplomacy ^[1]

In 2004, when the Indian Ocean tsunami hit a number of countries, the coastal regions of Indonesia and Sri Lanka were devastated. Before the tsunami, the public opinion of the United States in these and surrounding Muslim countries was predictably low; however the huge efforts of US humanitarian aid immediately following as well as long after the crisis swayed public opinions that remained high even a year later in a follow-up poll. US AID currently reports successful efforts to re-build the hardest hit cities and enable an early-warning system for future potential catastrophic events. The aid was not given to boost public opinion, nor have the long-term assistance programs received the international media coverage that the initial efforts attained. Yet the impact on the public perception of the U.S. in those countries has been positive and significant.

At present, the United States is involved in another massive relief effort for those affected by the devastating 7.0 earthquake in Haiti. The initial reports from Haiti were grim and became bleaker in the following weeks as aftershocks hit and terror swept the capital city of Port-au-Prince. Relief agencies struggled to provide supplies due to severe limitations due to a collapsed infrastructure.

Despite the best efforts of the United States to respond quickly and in a way that would be beneficial, initial aid efforts were criticized as being slow, disorganized, and lacking in leadership. Due to the fact that US military forces were controlling the airport, the United States became the focus for many of these critiques.

In an effort to stem these criticisms, and re-cast American efforts in a positive light, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton recently said, "I deeply resent those who attack our country, the generosity of our people and the leadership of our president in trying to respond to historically disastrous conditions after the earthquake." While media attention is still focused on Haiti, the United States hopes to be remembered in the media for the outpouring of compassion and help, and not as incompetent or political. Especially because the hardest work is yet to come and will likely receive little attention, just as with the rebuilding efforts for the 2004 Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina.

Now that the initial panic has resided, Haitians must focus on the task of surviving hurricane season while re-building their lives. The International Organization for Migration estimates that 900,000 to 1.1 million people are in acute need of emergency shelter. Aid workers are now focusing on providing shelter in the form of temporary tent villages with latrines and access to water and food. Once basic needs are met, there are plans to re-build the fallen city and surrounding areas using lessons learned from both Tsunami aid in 2004 and Hurricane Katrina efforts in 2005. One thing is certain; it will not be a quick or easy process to re-build an

already impoverished country.

Nevertheless the United States has committed itself to long-term rebuilding efforts. Vice President Joe Biden traveled to Florida and reassured Miami's Little Haiti that, "On behalf of the administration, our hearts ache for you. The president does not view this as a humanitarian mission with a life cycle of a month...This will still be on our radar screen long after it's off the crawler at CNN. This is going to be a long slog."

According to the Pew Research Center for People and the Press, in the first week following the earthquake, "18 percent of Americans said they or someone in their household had made a donation to help those affected by the catastrophe and 30% say they are planning to make a donation." In addition to US AID, a number of U.S. based humanitarian agencies have solicited and received donations.^[1] Each of these American based organizations will work on behalf of Americans to provide relief, and have likewise expressed plans to rebuild over a long period of time.

Humanitarian aid is a powerful tool for significant and positive goodwill; however, the shift in public diplomacy must be the aftereffect of such aid. Both governments and humanitarian aid programs must vigilantly protect themselves from slandering or false motives that can accompany and dim even the best of efforts. To be successful, humanitarian aid must save lives in the emergency hours after a crisis when the media is watching, as well as build stability in the years to follow. In terms of public diplomacy, the situation in Haiti represents another opportunity for the United States to remind the world of its tremendous capacity for good, and of the generous and concerned global citizens that reside within its borders. Hopefully this crisis will spark engagement that lasts for at least a generation and dramatically changes the standard of living for Haitians in the future.

[1] Most notable include: The America Red Cross, Hope for Haiti Now, Clinton Bush Haiti Fund, Musician Wyclef Jean's Yele Haiti, Direct Relief International, and the Salvation Army, among many others working to provide relief.
