Haiti and the Limits of Generosity

Monday, 15 February 2010

All over the world, people have responded generously to the devastating earthquake that struck Haiti. In just three days, more than a million Americans had donated $10 with the aid of text messages from their cellphones. People with very little themselves, like Maria Pacheco, an unemployed single mother from Chicago, donated food and clothes.

Others did whatever they could – from pedicures to washing cars – to raise money. On current indications, the amount Americans will give to relief efforts in Haiti could surpass the $1.9 billion they gave to assist victims of the 2004 Asian tsunami, which until now has stood as a record for donations to a disaster outside the United States. Given that the US is undergoing economic hard times, the size of the response has surprised many.

Haiti’s proximity, plus the fact that close to a million Haitians live in the US, goes some way towards explaining why Americans have responded so generously. But the response has been worldwide. In Melbourne for the Australian Open, Roger Federer, Serena Williams, and other stars held an exhibition match that led to donations of $600,000. In Rwanda, a group of community health workers making less than $200 a month raised $7,000 for Haiti.

All of this raises many questions about how we respond – and how we should respond – to such tragedies. The earthquake killed up to 200,000 people. Terrible as that is, it is fewer than the number of children who, according to the United Nations Children’s Fund, UNICEF, die every 10 days from avoidable, poverty-related causes. Moreover, as Elie Hassenfeld has argued on GiveWell.net, there are good grounds for thinking that disaster relief is less cost-effective than aid aimed at saving the lives of those who are risk from extreme poverty.

Why do people give generously to earthquake victims, but not to prevent the much larger number of deaths brought about by extreme poverty, insufficient food, unsafe water, lack of sanitation, and the absence of even the most basic health care?

Media saturation obviously makes a critical difference. Scenes from Hurricane Katrina, the Asian tsunami, and now the Haitian earthquake were shown over and over again on all television news broadcasts. An earthquake in a remote part of Pakistan that killed 80,000 people received relatively little television coverage, and a much less generous response. The daily deaths of children in poor countries from diarrhea, measles, and malaria are part of the background of the world we live in, and so are not news at all.

Suppose that a million children all in one place seemed likely to be swept away and drowned by approaching floodwaters. The media coverage would be enormous. Now imagine the jubilation if they were saved! And imagine the acclaim for the heroes who had saved so many children.

Yet when UNICEF announced, in September of last year, that the number of children dying each year from poverty-related causes had dropped by one million, as compared to two years earlier, the story got very little media attention. The people who contributed to this drop by delivering effective basic health care, building a supply of safe water, or immunizing children against measles remain largely unknown.

Perhaps people respond more generously to the victims of natural disasters than they do to those in extreme poverty because, after a natural disaster, we tend not to blame the victims. We seem to accept that to be struck by an earthquake, a tidal wave, or a hurricane is just bad luck (unless, as the American evangelist Pat Robertson suggested after the Haitian earthquake, your ancestors made a pact with the devil in order to free themselves from colonial rule).

Still, many people profess to believe that poverty is the result of not working hard enough, or of having too many children. But the circumstances that produce extreme poverty are not, except in rare cases, under the control of such poor people. They may be, to some extent, under the control of governments, and undoubtedly bad government is a major contributor to poverty. But then, bad government can also contribute to the toll exacted by a natural disaster.

Two years ago, a team of geophysicists led by Eric Calais of Purdue University predicted that the fault that produced the recent Haitian earthquake was at high risk of doing exactly what it did. They urged the Haitian government to take steps to strengthen critical buildings, including hospitals and schools. Failure to do so contributed to the toll.

What should we do? Brian Tucker, founder of the non-profit organization Geohazards International, urges that 10% of the money raised by relief efforts should be set aside for mitigating damage from future earthquakes: training builders, improving engineering, and making the public more aware of the risks and how to reduce them. He claims that every dollar invested in preparing for natural disasters saves ten dollars in future damage.

Tucker’s proposal makes good sense, but it is difficult – and arguably unethical – for charities that raised money to help Haitians now to divert some of those funds to programs to mitigate the damage caused by future

earthquakes. It would be excellent if the general public responded to an appeal for funds for mitigating future damage. But the prospects of that happening are slim, because such an appeal would lack the emotional pull of the desire to help immediate victims. Instead, governments that are pledging aid to Haiti now should ensure that part of their assistance goes to reducing the chances that such a disaster will affect Haiti so dramatically again.

By Peter Singer

Peter Singer is Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University and Laureate Professor at the University of Melbourne. His most recent book is The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty.
Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2010.
www.project-syndicate.org