



After Disaster Strikes

8 strategies for supporting disaster recovery efforts for the long term

When disaster strikes, generosity pours out of donors' hearts and pockets. From Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy to the forest fires and floods in Colorado to the typhoon in the Philippines, we hear stories of foundations, nonprofits, businesses, and individual donors young and old joining forces to make a difference for disaster relief. But disaster recovery can take years, and gifts often slow or stop after the story no longer makes the evening news. Disaster recovery provides a great opportunity for grantmakers to have a meaningful impact long after other resources have stopped coming in. The following are eight ideas for funding longer-term disaster recovery efforts.

1. Perform needs assessments

The more ingrained we get in our work, the harder it is to see the big picture of our organization's real needs. We may think we need a new grantmaking strategy or an update of our vision, but do we really? A strategic consultant can provide you with an overview of your organization and your work and help you determine where you have real gaps and where you need to make strategic change.

1. Recognize that the full range of needs may not be evident right away.

While focusing on immediate needs, remember that it will take time for the full range of needs to emerge. Power loss, transportation outages, and flood-damaged homes may be top of mind, but the true nature of the damage is often still to be seen. Months after the 2013 flooding in Colorado, open spaces turned into hazards as rockslides became a real danger, and months later many towns were still primed for flash flooding during heavy rains. Recovery will take a long time, and funding will be needed throughout.

2. Step in where others may not.

There are places private philanthropy can help that government agencies might not. Situations that arise during and immediately after disasters (such as the hospital generator failure in New York or the levee failure in New Orleans) can offer prime opportunities for funding academic research on causes and best practices related to those situations. Careful analysis now can make all the difference in preparation for the future.

3. Tie funding to your mission.

If you are not in the region affected by the disaster, you may want to connect on a different, more mission-focused level. Look for ways to tie disaster funding into your existing mission. For example, help fund the rebuilding of schools if education is your focus, or provide funding for mental health services if your usual emphasis lies there.

4. Recognize new needs that emerge.

Disaster may expose needs not typically seen on this scale, which will open up possibilities for future disaster planning. You may be able to support plans for more effective distribution of food during massive power outages. Or there may be a need for environmental assessments and planning. When sewage and standing water cover portions of communities, for example, the risks of disease and environmental damage increase, and there's a need for tougher efforts to combat them.



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5. Support the sharing of best practices.

The right time to begin evaluating best practices is not when disaster strikes. Grantmakers can make sharing best practices for communities and for philanthropy a priority before the next emergency. For example, coastal communities in the northeast might benefit from learning about Florida's stringent building codes to mitigate destruction from hurricanes. Foundations can learn from several funder-oriented disaster response guides that have been published in recent years. Interested donors could help support the transfer of expertise from one region to another before the next disaster occurs.

6. Consider long-term, multiyear commitments.

Disasters provide a good opportunity for donors to engage in a region or with an individual part of a recovery effort for the long term. When you enter disaster recovery funding with the understanding that New Orleans still has not fully recovered from Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and New York still hasn't fully rebuilt from damage sustained on September 11, 2001, you can see that no matter where you choose to focus, you can make considerable change and provide unwavering support for years or even decades.

7. Think beyond national borders.

Ask yourself how our nation's natural disasters may impact other countries that are already struggling. Hurricane Sandy's effects were felt outside of the United States: Still crippled by the 2010 earthquake and affected by Hurricane Isaac in 2012, Haiti saw 52 deaths related to Sandy alone and faced a potential cholera epidemic and food shortages. Your involvement might include ways to address a wider range of victims when a disaster has far-reaching impact.

8. Connect with other funders.

Build relationships with funders across the affected region and the nation to ensure a collective and effective response. Collaborative philanthropic response to a disaster leverages combined expertise and maximizes the value of the human, financial, and technical resources that are donated. Use the Center for Disaster Philanthropy, your regional association, or other networks to plan and maximize your support.

Disaster recovery provides an opportunity to support your local community or state, your country, or even international efforts to create long-term sustainability. Careful planning and strategy, along with a willingness to share best practices and resources, can help your foundation have an impact that lasts for generations to come. At your next board or staff meeting, spend some time putting together general ideas about where you want to focus funding the next time disaster strikes. When the time comes, you can pinpoint specific needs and strategies right away to ensure that your dollars go further and meet the most needs, including the needs of your foundation.

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