



# THE IMPACT OF UNSOLICITED BILATERAL DONATIONS (UBDs) ON THE RESPONSE TO HURRICANE DORIAN IN THE BAHAMAS

**SUMMARY**

**+C IFRC**  
*Disaster Law*

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# ABOUT THIS REPORT

This Report was commissioned by the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). It was authored by Nicholas Polley, Consultant, supervised and reviewed by Jessie Jordan, IFRC Dutch and English-speaking Caribbean Delegation Disaster Law Officer, based on the guidance and technical inputs of Sophie Teyssier, IFRC Americas Disaster Law and Legislative Advocacy Coordinator and Rachel McLeod, IFRC Senior Officer, International and Public Relations, National Society, Policy and Knowledge Development.

This Report analyses the impact of unsolicited bilateral donations (UBDs) to the emergency response operations in the Bahamas, in the aftermath of Hurricane Dorian in 2019, with a view to proposing recommendations to reduce the incidence of UBDs.

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Front cover photo: © Angela Hill

Great Guana Cay, Bahamas: A Red Cross delegate walks through some of the more damaged areas of Great Guana Cay, a small island off the island of Abaco in the Bahamas.



Distribution 16.09.2019 of relief items in Abaco, the Bahamas; Hygiene kits, kitchen set, shelter toolkits, buckets, jerry cans and blankets. Hygiene and health promoted. © John Engedal Nissen / IFRC

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hurricane Dorian struck The Bahamas in September 2019, devastating the islands of Abaco and Grand Bahama, leading to an outpouring of support and humanitarian aid. A significant portion of this aid was provided as physical in-kind goods, sent from other islands in The Bahamas, and neighbouring countries including the United States. Donors included individuals, private companies, humanitarian organisations, and foreign governments, among others.

Unsolicited Bilateral Donations (UBDs) are goods that are spontaneously donated after a disaster which were not specifically requested at any point. UBDs can be problematic when they arrive in large quantities, they do not match the needs of the affected population, or they are not suitable for the climate and culture of the receiving country. They can put pressure on an already-stretched humanitarian supply chain system and incur many thousands of dollars in storage and handling fees. They can also have a substantial environmental impact if they are disposed of as landfill in a region where safe waste management options are scarce. While the negative impacts of UBDs can be clearly identified, this research acknowledged that grey areas may exist in relation to categorizing which goods should be considered as UBDs, and categorization may be dependent on the approach used. In this report, the specific context of the Hurricane Dorian response is used to shape the understanding of UBDs, using the most practical approaches to analyse this phenomenon.

## Examples of UBDs in the response to Hurricane Dorian

In the weeks and months following Hurricane Dorian in 2019, there was an outpouring of support to The Bahamas, including significant in-kind donations. The arrival of UBDs in the affected islands was largely not tracked and there are only limited data records available. Nevertheless, Key Informants provided examples of UBDs encountered during their respective operations in The Bahamas.

- Poor quality, used clothing
- Soiled mattresses
- Expired food items (in some cases, rotting food was covered in insects and environmental teams had to be brought in to fumigate and advise on disposal)
- Perishable dairy food items
- Unsolicited donations including kitchen sets (70 tonnes); 1008 food parcels and 5000 mattresses; 20 ft. containers of wheat (100lb bales)
- Four 40 ft. containers of bottled water that could have been provided locally
- Miscellaneous unsolicited items including thousands of 2-man tents and mosquito nets, Dell computer brackets and obsolete outdoor security camera brackets
- Faulty television sets and fridges
- Unusable second-hand toys

## Key Findings and Recommendations

Key findings revealed that individuals and organisations in the Caribbean and the USA mobilised large amounts of humanitarian aid after seeing striking pictures of the disaster and reacting to wide-spread calls from various official and unofficial sources. However, much of the aid sent fell into the category of UBDs. For example, in Grand Bahama, out of 100 containers of in-kind goods received, at least 40 were not usable due to spoilage – food was rotten and used clothes were soiled. The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) received several large shipments of unsolicited goods which contributed to bills of over USD 500,000 in freight charges for NEMA for goods which were not needed and caused blockages to the humanitarian response system.

This study examines the impact of UBDs in the response to Hurricane Dorian and is grounded in the recommendations stemming from the *“Guidelines for the domestic facilitation and regulation of international disaster relief and initial recovery assistance”* otherwise known as the *“IDRL Guidelines”*.

In light of the *IDRL Guidelines*, and to reduce the incidence of UBDs, this Report recommends developing a UBD policy as part of an update to the National Disaster Preparedness and Response Plan which:

- Clarifies the development and communication of Needs lists. In particular, clarity should be provided on which agency or department should have sole responsibility for developing and sharing of Needs Lists and how they should be shared. Given its mandate, this would most appropriately sit with NEMA and could benefit from the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to share through diplomatic channels.
- Reviews the conditions on which legal facilities are made available to assisting actors, for example, the process for accessing legal facilities such as the customs and VAT waivers should be based on well-defined eligibility criteria; and
- Focuses on sharing convincing ‘cash is best’ messaging. Specifically, ‘cash is best’ communications resonated most when coupled with stories explaining why this is the case – for example emphasising that cash can boost the local economy, highlighting the likelihood of wastage where in-kind aid is shipped from overseas and demonstrating the logistics challenges and costs of shipping.



Red Cross volunteers unloaded pallets of ice from a semi-truck and distributed it to the community in the island of Grand Bahama. The ice will help people keep their food from spoiling and can be used for drinking water. © Jenelle Eli/IFRC

# THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

## **Humanity**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

## **Impartiality**

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

## **Neutrality**

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

## **Independence**

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

## **Voluntary service**

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

## **Unity**

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

## **Universality**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.



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