

# Ukraine crisis: why you should donate money rather than supplies

Published: March 3, 2022 11.07am GMT

The humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and its effect on neighbouring countries has inspired people to collect donations. But these well-meaning efforts can cause headaches for those helping locally. In aid circles, the mantra has long been “[cash is best](#)”.

Cash donations may feel impersonal. It is much more fulfilling to pack stuffed animals and imagine the smiles they will put on the faces of traumatised children. Many worry that cash donations may never reach the refugees from Ukraine, but disappear somewhere on the way.

That fear can be alleviated with a little research. Many countries offer online [registers of charities](#) and [charity evaluators](#) provide further information. [Transparency](#) in humanitarian aid is improving. Many established organisations publish detailed information about their work and finances on their websites.

According to the United Nations Human Rights Council, over [1 million refugees](#) have arrived in neighbouring countries since the invasion began. To help people fleeing war, collections of donations have started in [community centres](#) in Liverpool, UK, [ice hockey fan clubs](#) in Mannheim, Germany, and many other places. Food, clothing, painkillers, blankets, toothpaste and other items are being collected in vast amounts.

Many donations are destined for Poland. Poland has so far taken in [over 505,000](#) refugees from Ukraine, with [almost 100,000 arriving daily](#). One of the authors of this article, Wojciech Piotrowicz, is in Warsaw, advising the Polish authorities on the response to the influx of refugees and applying his research in humanitarian logistics. Shown media coverage of donations piling up in other countries, his immediate reaction was: “Terrible. In a worst-case scenario, we need to think of how to recycle this, there aren’t even enough people to sort it all.”

There are a few considerations worth thinking about before sending items rather than donating money.

## 1. What is needed?

With huge solidarity in Poland, the supply of donated items at the border [far outstrips demand](#). There are so many items, they now have to be moved away from the border so as not to block the area. If anything is missing, it can be bought locally without adding the cost of international transport.

There was already a [1.5 million-strong](#) Ukrainian community in Poland. Around [90% of the new arrivals](#) will stay with family and friends. Free rides are offered at border crossings and [train travel is free](#) for arrivals from Ukraine. The majority of the [mostly women and children](#) move on swiftly from the border and rarely seek any material aid.

The [need is greatest](#) in Ukraine, where [food shortages](#) are being reported in certain areas. Of course, it is much more difficult to deliver aid in a war zone. The European Commission has started to transport urgently needed [medical and civil protection items](#) to Kyiv. The [UN is working with its humanitarian partners](#) to support local authorities setting up reception centres for refugees within Ukraine and plans to set up a distribution hub in Poland.

## 2. How will items be transported?

Unsolicited donations are often held up by [faulty paperwork](#). Anyone considering sending items should know who they are being sent to and who takes care of any required [customs clearances](#) and covers associated costs. Items should be expected at their destination with plans of how and where they will be handled. Send what is really needed, not what you think is needed.

Poland is suffering from a [shortage of truck drivers](#). This is now exacerbated by immigrants from Ukraine going back [to join the fight](#). Many of them were drivers. Donated goods need to reach their destination without putting more pressure on transport networks.

## 3. How will items be stored and distributed?

The amount of donations in Poland has been so large that areas close to the border are [running out of warehouse space](#) before most international donations have arrived. Rising demand for warehousing space could drive up costs and add to a shortage of warehouse workers.

Insufficient or inappropriate storage facilities can result in goods going to waste. Many [images currently circulating](#) show vast amounts of clothes laid out [on the ground or in cardboard boxes](#) at reception points at the Polish-Ukrainian border. Rainfall will quickly turn those donations into piles of rubbish.

A big worry for local authorities coordinating the response is how to sort arriving items. Inevitably, donations will vary in quality. It is common for food or medicines to arrive past their expiry date or to be damaged by heat, cold or humidity. Other donations are simply inappropriate. After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, unsolicited donations received included ten containers of refrigerators which used a different voltage than the one in Haiti, as well as wedding dresses and party supplies.

Dumping donations and hoping they will be used somehow creates additional work and is unlikely to do any good. Every organisation that sends items needs to be able to distribute them. It is particularly important to have people on the ground long term. At the moment, many are keen to volunteer but will have to return to their lives in a week or two. Large aid agencies work with rotations of volunteers, ensuring smooth handovers and continuity.

## 4. What happens to unused items?

Needs in a humanitarian response shift constantly. Items that were desperately needed days ago are quickly available in abundance if donations are uncoordinated. Flexibility is important. While cash donations can be used flexibly, donated goods are fixed. Not all of them will be used.

Every item should be brought into an area with a clear exit plan. Donations should not go to waste or be left as problems for local authorities to handle. But recycling schemes or the collection of unused items need to be planned.

## Balancing cash and goods

In many humanitarian responses, 60% of donations end up in landfills. It is cheaper and more environmentally friendly to use items that are available locally rather than ship them around the world. It is also more likely to meet the actual and current needs.

Donated goods are needed where the local market cannot supply them. However, it is necessary to deliver exactly what is needed. There should be a balance between donated goods, local procurement and cash support. In Ukraine right now, there is a shortage of certain medical items, but these are not owned by the public and have to be ordered from specialist suppliers.

Monetary donations remain the most efficient way to help. Anyone who prefers to donate things could consider selling them locally. All proceeds can then be donated to organisations helping refugees.

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## Disclosure statement

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Sarah Schiffling is affiliated with the Humanitarian Logistics Association.

Wojciech D. Piotrowicz receives funding from Academy of Finland, project title ‘Cash and/or Carry: The challenges and modalities of delivering aid in conflict zones’ (decision no. 322188).

## Partners

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[Liverpool John Moores University](#) provides funding as a member of The Conversation UK.

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