



*By Julian Ryall, in Tokyo*

International aid for emergencies comes in many forms, and necessity really can be the mother of invention amongst donors. Just ask the [Japan](#) -based World Instant [Noodle](#) Association: when disaster strikes - they send noodles.

And the world's hungry and sick are happy that they do.

The association - whose acronym is WINA - draws donations from instant noodle producers and a disaster relief fund created by the late inventor of the instant noodle, Momofuku Ando, and former chairman of the International Ramen Manufacturers' Association. This year alone, the organisation donated 600,000 servings after typhoons struck the [Philippines](#) and an earthquake battered [Indonesia](#)

"Serving a hot meal such as instant noodles makes people feel relieved in stricken areas," said WINA spokesperson Ai Miyamoto, who says Momofuku's fund was an expression of his philosophy.

But instant noodles, at least, are small and versatile - making them a comparably useful donation arriving at relief sites. Some donations are not that useful. Trouble is, there is too often a mis-match between what we give and what is needed. Who, for instance, decided it would be a good idea to send ski parkas and ski suits to Indonesia after the devastating tsunami hit on December 26, 2004?

Sometimes, it takes time to work out what to do with a gift. The Hong Kong-based aid organisation Helping Hand was once given an athlete's beam that sat in its warehouse

gathering dust until a rehabilitation centre in [Romania](#) happily took it off their hands. Likewise, staff had no idea what to do with dozens of boxes of exquisitely crafted silk flowers until they were bundled off with other equipment to hospitals in

[India](#)

, where they were quickly put into service brightening up the wards.

"So many people have the desire to be helpful and to step forward when disaster strikes, but there is a big difference between good intentions and good aid," said David Begbie, public relations and development spokesman for Helping Hand. The organisation has developed standards that the aid industry can ask donors to meet with their gifts - such as making sure the donation of medicine is not the dumping of drugs that are 20 years out of date. And others may be driven by the desire to be helpful but fall down when it comes to the logistics involved, like the woman who bought a hotel in [Scotland](#) and called Hong Kong asking whether Helping Hand could have the old furniture cleared out within 24 hours.

But it is the thought that counts - the thought that what might be useless junk to me may be very beneficial to someone else who is not nearly so fortunate. In the Japanese city of Yokohama, the staff of The Japanese Organisation for International Cooperation in Family Planning was recently scaling a mountain of more than 2,600 school satchels donated by local children after sending out a request for school supplies for [Afghan](#) children. They even examined every satchel to weed out the ones made of pigskin to make sure they did not offend Islamic sensibilities.

Good for them.