



Crisis After Crisis

Reimagining Corporate Disaster Response

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Introduction

In an era marked by more frequent, intense, and costly disasters, corporate disaster-related giving is on the rise. From pandemics and geopolitical crises to climate-related hurricanes, wildfires, and floods, the growing scale and complexity of crises demand a reimagined approach to disaster response strategies. Many companies now recognize that disaster response cannot merely be a reactionary effort. **To make a meaningful difference, companies are looking for ways to integrate disaster response into their broader social impact strategies and address everything from immediate relief to long-term preparedness.**

We created this resource to help companies be more proactive and strategic in their own disaster response efforts. Our research included in-depth interviews with 13 companies across industries and a landscape analysis of existing literature, case studies, and industry reports. This brief offers resources to help companies prepare for the next disaster and highlights emerging best practices and real-life examples of ways that companies have structured their own disaster preparedness and response.

STATE OF CORPORATE DISASTER-RELATED GIVING

Traditionally, disaster response comprised a relatively small portion of a company's social impact portfolio, whether housed by a corporate social responsibility (CSR) or citizenship team or the company's foundation. Since 2020, 53% of companies have increased the quantity of disasters to which they respond, and over 60% have increased their total philanthropic spending on disasters, according to The Conference Board.¹

While total disaster philanthropy is increasing, it still accounts for a surprisingly small portion of total philanthropic funding, and a minority of funding from corporate sources. Of all philanthropic giving in 2021, about \$3 billion was directed towards disasters, comprising 2% of total philanthropic funding.² Between 2016 and 2020, 37% of total natural disaster funding was given by companies and company-affiliated foundations.³

Expectations—from consumers, employees, communities, as well as public and social sector partners—for how companies respond to these disasters are increasing. The frequency and intensity of disasters are anticipated to continue to rise in years to come, underlining the importance of strategic and impactful disaster response. Studies have also shown that when local and multi-national companies give aid, countries are able to unlock additional aid more quickly and experience higher rates of long-term recovery.⁴

Across companies, we're encouraged by **six trends in how companies are evolving their disaster response**:

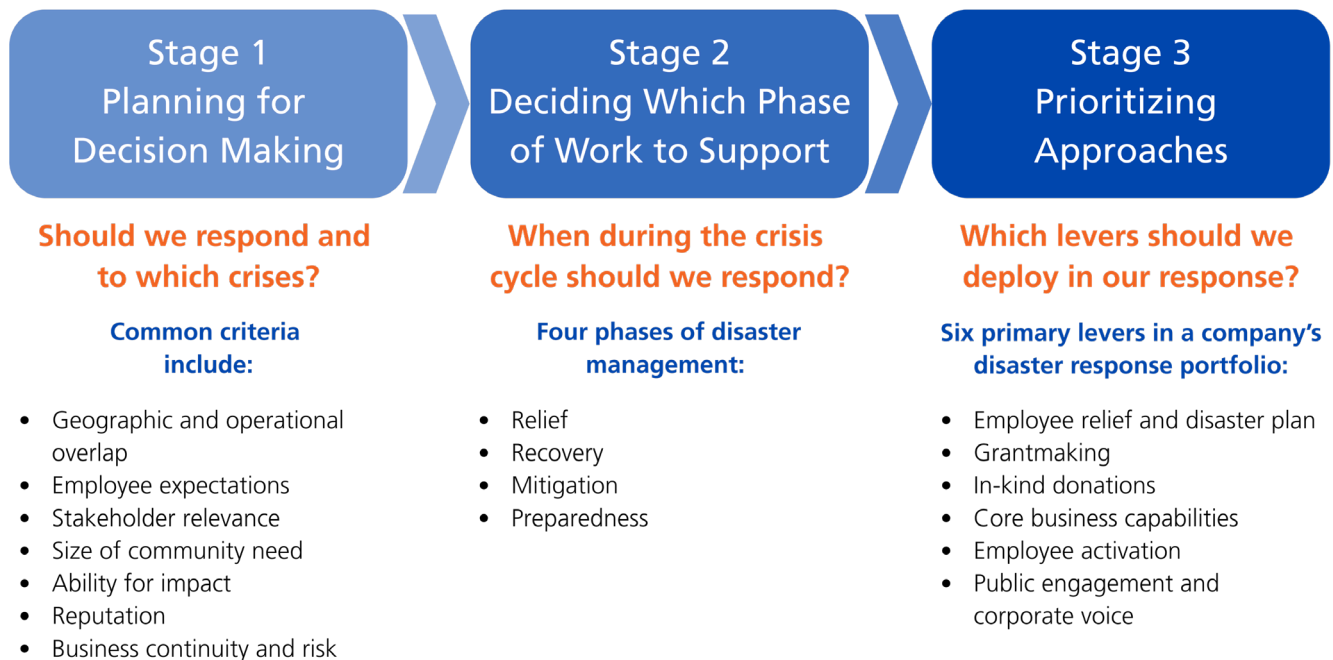
1. **Redefining Disasters:** Companies are expanding their definition of "disaster" to include public health emergencies and humanitarian crises.
2. **Making Response More Strategic:** Disaster response increasingly comprises a larger part of company's overall social impact portfolio and is viewed as strategic as opposed to a standalone part.
3. **Creating a Decision-Making Framework:** Companies are using increased structure to decide if and how to respond to crises, and to enable faster activation when a disaster occurs.

4. **Embedding Equity:** Equity considerations are showing up more consistently in disaster response.
5. **Supporting the Entire Disaster Cycle:** Companies are going beyond immediate relief to support the other phases—i.e., recovery, mitigation, and preparedness—of the disaster management cycle.
6. **Utilizing Multiple Impact Levers:** Companies are deploying levers beyond traditional philanthropy.

STAGES OF CORPORATE DISASTER RESPONSE

Several choices can facilitate increased speed, innovation, equity, and impact of disaster response. These three questions can guide companies in how to structure and maximize the impact of their disaster strategies:

Stages of Corporate Disaster Response



Stage 1. Planning for Decision Making

Should we respond and to which crises?

Proactively creating a disaster response framework for when, where, and how to respond allows companies to make decisions more efficiently, deploy resources rapidly, and improve both internal and external collaboration. Forward-thinking companies strategically incorporate multiple stakeholders' perspectives into their response frameworks by gathering employee and customer input on disaster response priorities, surveying community expectations, and establishing a clear and relatively flat decision-making body (e.g., steering or advisory committee, executive lead) that can quickly mobilize when a crisis occurs.

The Center for Disaster Philanthropy advises funders to develop preparedness plans that outline when and how organizations will respond and define the levers that they might utilize (i.e., direct funding, in-kind support).⁵ Common criteria for companies include geographic and operational overlap, employee expectations, stakeholder relevance, size of community need, ability for impact, reputation, and business continuity and risk.

For example, **PayPal** created a Rapid Response Framework that clearly defines their values, goals, unique

positioning, and key stakeholders. When a disaster occurs, their scorecard helps to understand how primary stakeholders (employees, customers, and partners) are impacted. Accordingly, they consider a menu of response options to make decisions about whether and how to best respond. This approach facilitates strategic and coherent decision making in times of crisis and serves to build buy-in at the executive level and with all relevant team members. Sharing the criteria and framework helps internal stakeholders stay aligned on goals, priorities, and processes, and manages expectations with employees about the company's response.

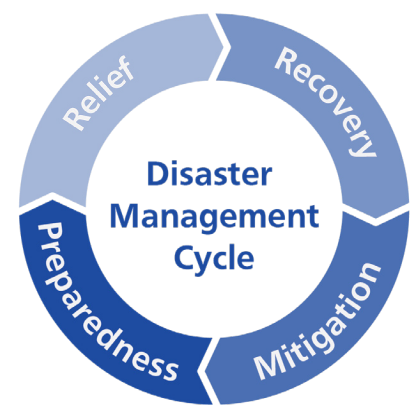
Similarly, **Cisco** utilizes a set of criteria weighing factors such as the severity of a disaster, expected response timeline, impact to communications infrastructure, and impact of the disaster on employees, customers, and partners. The unique circumstances for each individual disaster will shape a response that is not only strategic and impactful, but also timely and aligned with the company's values and social impact strategy.

Stage 2. Deciding Which Phase of Work to Support

When during the crisis cycle should we respond?

There are four key phases of a disaster: immediate **relief** when a disaster strikes to address critical short-term needs, long-term **recovery** efforts for ongoing restoration and rebuilding, **mitigation** of future disasters, and **preparedness** to build capacity across impacted stakeholders for when the next disaster strikes.⁶

Funding each phase is important but requires unique consideration and has different impacts. Historically, the phases have received neither equal nor sufficient philanthropic funding. For example, 90% of disaster funding goes to immediate relief work, while only 1% is allocated to preparedness.⁷ Typically, one-third of donations occur within the first four weeks after a disaster and two-thirds within two months, with donations nearly halting by the time recovery is underway. Like other funders, companies primarily focus on immediate relief. Only 42% of companies surveyed by The Conference Board supported pre-disaster preparedness, compared to 96% who support immediate relief and 72% who support short-term recovery.⁸



This approach leaves money—and impact—on the table. Studies have shown that, in the United States, every dollar spent by the government on mitigation efforts saves \$6 in future costs, hundreds of saved lives, and the creation of thousands of jobs.⁹ Globally, that ratio averages 1:7.¹⁰

Companies can multiply their overall impact by considering when in the cycle their giving occurs and dedicating more resources to the mitigation and preparedness phases. For example, **Cisco** spreads its funding across the phases to have long-term impact. They support response and recovery and aim to build preparedness within communities to manage future crises.

Stage 3. Prioritizing Approaches

Which levers should we deploy in our response?

Most companies default to grantmaking and product or in-kind donations for crisis response. However, companies can deploy other assets and capabilities to increase their impact. We identified **six primary levers** companies can consider as they build more holistic disaster response strategies.

1. **Worker relief and disaster plan:** First and foremost, companies should have a plan in place to ensure employees in affected areas are safe and accounted for, and that all employees know the plan and what resources they have access to via the company. For example, in addition to an emergency plan, **Cargill** partnered with E4E Relief to launch the company's Employee Disaster Relief Fund in June 2020, which provides support to employees across all Cargill geographies for immediate relief during times of catastrophic or personal disaster. As the Fund evolved, employees, partners, and external stakeholders were able to contribute to this Fund in addition to Cargill's contributions.¹¹ **DoorDash**, the local commerce platform, has a toolkit of responses including turning off the app in a crisis area to avoid sending Dashers into harm's way.
2. **Grantmaking:** The most common lever used by companies is giving grants to organizations working on disaster response. Many companies rely on preexisting relationships or pre-positioned funding to ensure that money can be used quickly by partners. **Salesforce** ensures that partners can utilize funds when and how is most needed by prepositioning some of its disaster funds ahead of crises, freeing up valuable time once a disaster occurs. Another company shared they specifically think about what different groups will need during crises. For example, children, pregnant women, or individuals receiving ongoing medical treatment might all have different needs during a disaster. Similarly, **DoorDash** provides targeted support through the Dasher Relief Fund, offering up to \$1,000 for eligible hardship events, and the Restaurant Disaster Relief Fund, granting \$10,000 to help restaurants recover from natural disasters. Partnering intentionally to ensure groups get tailored assistance can increase the effectiveness of funds. Lastly, giving unrestricted grants allows partner organizations to use their funds as effectively and expeditiously as possible during crises while meeting the evolving and diverse needs of communities.
3. **In-kind donations:** Another significant way companies contribute during times of crisis is by donating their products or services. For example, **Johnson & Johnson** works with international relief agencies and local partners on the front lines to assess critical health needs and rapidly respond with an array of appropriate donated consumer, pharmaceutical, and medical products.¹² In-kind donations are particularly common among healthcare and life sciences, retail, and consumer products and goods companies. Many companies conduct employee drives to collect products to donate to communities impacted by disasters. A best practice is to partner with a relief agency or local nonprofit to identify and collect specific high-need items. This approach helps ensure local partners have the capacity to effectively distribute and use the donations, minimizing waste and maximizing impact.
4. **Core business capabilities:** Companies are also sitting on a wealth of business assets and capabilities that can be activated across the disaster management cycle. For example, **Google** organizes information that is relevant during a crisis and makes it easily accessible on prominent, high-traffic platforms (e.g., Search, Maps, Android). Along with funding, **Google.org** provides expertise to humanitarian organizations such as DISHA at UN Global Pulse, which has embedded and leveraged a Google Research-built disaster damage detection model to be used at scale within the UN and the

humanitarian sector. Logistics companies like **UPS** activate their distribution networks to ensure critical supplies get to affected areas as efficiently as possible. During the COVID-19 pandemic, **Nextdoor** launched several initiatives to help neighbors stay connected. For instance, a ‘Help Map’ was created that enabled neighbors to offer and request assistance with errands or tasks. This feature has also been deployed during moments of more localized crises—such as intense snowstorms or hurricanes—and the company is evolving the product into an essential daily neighborhood network, encouraging social connection both during and outside of crisis moments.

Leveraging a company’s core business assets not only amplifies impact, but also can strengthen a company’s business model and strategic position. In the **utility industry**, both public and private companies recognize that quickly restoring access is critical to their business model. Outside of company grantmaking, business teams prioritize working to improve monitoring of services, response times, and scenario planning for disasters (e.g., how to determine where, how, and in what order to restore service in different situations). See table “Industry-specific Assets for Disaster Response” for additional examples of how different industries are deploying unique assets across the disaster management cycle.

5. **Employee activation:** Employees expect their company to respond in times of crisis and often want to contribute individually as well. Many companies facilitate employee giving through fundraising platforms, collection drives for specific essential supplies, matching donations, or curating a list of trusted partner organizations for employees to give directly. Others will leverage employees’ unique skills. One company we spoke with allows employees to spend up to two weeks paid volunteer time using their skills (e.g., crisis communications, technical expertise) to support disaster response. **UPS** has an “Experts on Mission” program where partner organizations can identify a bottleneck in their own response system and are matched with a UPS employee, based on the specific skills required, who is deployed to work on the project for a short duration. The company’s Logistics Emergency Team works with partners to train employees to respond to disasters and maintains this roster of employees that can be deployed on-demand during crisis times.
6. **Public engagement and corporate voice:** In preparation for and response to crises, companies can also lend their voice to advocate for more impactful and equitable disaster response as well as bigger systems-level changes that may be beyond the scope of one company or industry. Some companies consider releasing public statements from their leadership, calling on individuals, communities, and peers to join response efforts and disaster reduction coalitions. Others utilize their public affairs teams to leverage existing relationships for advocacy and coalition building around disaster. Companies with wide-reaching platforms, like in the **media and telecommunications industry**, also utilize their channels to update the public with relevant information during crises.

INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC ASSETS FOR DISASTER RESPONSE

Industry	Distinct Assets & Capabilities	Example
Aerospace & Defense	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advanced logistics, monitoring, and communications systems Rapid evacuation & distribution infrastructure 	Northrop Grumman's autonomous Global Hawk provides imagery of disaster zones, limiting unnecessary risk for humanitarian workers ¹³
Automotive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vehicle fleet for backup emergency transportation Warehouses, distribution centers, and shelter 	Toyota donates vehicles that have become part of the American Red Cross response fleet ¹⁴
Consumer Products & Goods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extensive supply chain management and last-mile distribution networks Inventory of essential products (e.g., hygiene) (Brand) crisis communications and plans 	Unilever partners with Direct Relief, donating products to include in emergency kits and utilizing distribution networks to get kits to communities as fast as possible ¹⁵
Energy & Natural Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to substantial capital, resources, and stockpiles of critical supplies Specialized heavy equipment for relief 	Xylem provided dewatering equipment to dewater tunnels when a dam collapsed in 2019 in Zimbabwe and trapped 70+ gold miners ¹⁶
Financial Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specialized products and services (e.g., low/no-interest recovery loans, emergency savings) Expedited deployment of funds 	Mastercard's suite of response products (e.g., Send, Mastercard Aid Network, Prepaid Humanitarian Program) enable near real-time fund disbursement ¹⁷
Food & Agriculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Food supplies Relationship networks (i.e., value chain, community connections, industry coalitions) Information systems & analytics (e.g., weather monitoring, supply chain visibility) 	Hershey leveraged supplier and partner networks in Ghana, Belize, and Mexico to educate producers (cocoa farmers) on safety guidelines and prevention best practices during the COVID-19 pandemic ¹⁸
Healthcare & Life Sciences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inventory of essential medicines and services Specialized workforce; response and emergency training 	AstraZeneca donates its medicines to designated nonprofit partners for disaster relief and humanitarian response ¹⁹
Hospitality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical footprint (e.g., for staging, shelter) Access to essential supplies, including supply chain and distribution infrastructure 	Starbucks utilizes their stores as a place for first responders to gather during ongoing response efforts
Industrial Goods & Manufacturing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engineering & technical expertise Production capacity & flexibility (e.g., for personal protective equipment (PPE)) Supply chain, logistics, & heavy infrastructure 	Dow deploys membrane technology for emergency water filtration and treatment, innovative and sustainable packaging for relief, and silicone sealants for preparedness ²⁰
Logistics & Transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distribution infrastructure to deploy quickly Expertise (e.g., skills, technical capabilities) related to emergency management 	FedEx dedicates aircraft and logistics networks for disaster relief and provides rapid transport of emergency equipment, fleet, and teams ²¹
Media & Telecommunications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communications systems and infrastructure Broad reaching network to distribute information 	Cisco provides connectivity to emergency response agencies and crisis-affected communities; Verizon deploys flood sensors and provides disaster preparedness education for historically underserved communities
Retail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inventory of essential supplies Physical footprint (e.g., for planning, shelter) Supply chain and distribution networks 	Walmart deployed its trucking fleet and was one of the first responders to deliver critical supplies when FEMA and others were unable to access New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina ²²
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Innovative tools (products, services) and capabilities (e.g., data analytics, maps) User network and platform to facilitate connections and information dissemination 	Google leverages information and analytics strengths to build products for responders and surface needed information prominently; Google.org supports humanitarian NGOs to build customized products (e.g., IRC's Signpost, OCHA's Signals)
Utilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broad access to affected populations Resilience plans and response infrastructure, teams, and networks (e.g., mutual assistance) 	Exelon has a collaborative emergency response plan that deploys teams and equipment across its six utility companies to aid in immediate relief and energy restoration ²³

EMERGING BEST PRACTICES

Some companies are notably pushing the frontier and the field. These emerging best practices focus on ways to connect disaster response to business strategy, center equity, and unlock innovation and collaboration.

Explicitly connecting to the company's purpose.

Connecting disaster response to a company's purpose ensures that crisis efforts are not just reactive but aligned with long-term goals, authentic to the company's values and history, and strategic. **Esri**, the leading provider of geographic information systems (GIS) views its Disaster Response Program (DRP) as a key way in which the company lives its purpose "to help solve the world's most complex problems" and "map the way to a better future," providing a place for employees to do their life's work and running a healthy business.²⁴ A purpose-driven approach to disaster response allows companies to make a meaningful impact during crises, reinforce their commitment to the issues they champion every day, and foster stronger support and deeper engagement from employees and external stakeholders for long-term change. How a company responds can impact an employee's sense of belonging, customers' and communities' levels of trust, and the strength of the relationship with suppliers, distributors, and other partners. Connecting disaster response to purpose demonstrates to each of these stakeholder groups that the company sees these activities as fundamentally linked to how they create and deliver value for the world.

Building more equitable partnerships and sharing power.

Racial, economic, gender, and other inequities shape the ways in which disasters impact communities and how they can respond and recover. Disaster funding that fails to consider pre-existing disparities—and the ways in which a disaster exacerbates those disparities—can lead to further inequitable outcomes throughout recovery. One way that companies inject an equity lens into their work is through intentional partnership strategies that seek to ensure local efforts are bolstered and historically marginalized communities are prioritized. Drawing from trust-based philanthropy principles, (e.g. flexible,

unrestricted funding; no or low reporting) relieves grantee burden and builds the capacity of organizations.²⁵ The Center for Disaster Philanthropy (CDP) highlights the importance of centering local perspectives and has shown that doing so helps to resolve issues more quickly.²⁶ Assessing key partners and capacity gaps and then funding them proactively can ensure resources are more equitably distributed before a disaster. This practice can specifically support capacity building for smaller, under-resourced, or historically marginalized groups.^{27, 28} Many companies are intentionally incorporating local, place-based, or community organizations in their strategies. **PayPal's** strategy combines proactively allocated funding for large, global organizations alongside support for hyper-local organizations that are positioned within impacted communities. For companies that don't work directly with community organizations, their work can still include them as partners. For example, **Tripadvisor** and the **Tripadvisor Foundation** leverage relationships with organizations such as GlobalGiving to deploy funds to a network of vetted partners in destinations that have been impacted by severe natural disasters. **PG&E** deploys funding quickly by making a single grant to the League of California Community Foundations, which regrants to impacted geographies based on the appropriate networks and structures that can best serve each community.

Advancing bold and innovative approaches.

Companies—particularly large multinational corporations—often have deep resources, flexibility to move quickly, and dedicated innovation teams that position them well to test and champion new and bold approaches. **Google.org** supports the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to develop predictive analytic capabilities and tools, while supporting other nonprofits to leverage predictive capabilities to provide anticipatory cash.²⁹

Another technology company partners with humanitarian organizations to uplevel their ability to use technology, which increases the partners' ability to respond to all crises in the future and sets them up to get additional funding.

Coordinating with other funders and sharing learnings with the field. Funder collaboration reduces duplication, streamlines responses, and frees up capacity to leverage unique assets as well as address a larger set of crises.³⁰ Whether this collaboration occurs through formal co-funding and programmatic structures, informal and ongoing conversations, or participation in funder groups, collaboratives like the Connecting Business initiative (CBI)³¹ of UN OCHA and UNDP or the Private Sector Humanitarian Alliance (PSHA)³² can maximize the total impact of resources dedicated towards a disaster. Yet only 28% of companies surveyed by The Conference Board partnered with peers in their

disaster philanthropy work.³³

In addition to direct collaboration, companies can utilize their experiences to build the field's understanding of best practices, effective strategies, and lessons learned. Taking time after a crisis ends to reflect on, learn from, and document work alongside partners builds an individual funder's capacity to respond effectively and has broader impacts on the field.

CONCLUSION

The evolving nature and landscape of disaster philanthropy calls for companies to adopt innovative and strategic approaches that align more closely with their core missions and values. By more intentionally and comprehensively integrating disaster response into their social impact strategies, companies can ensure that their efforts not only address immediate needs, but also contribute to long-term recovery and preparedness. As more organizations recognize the critical role they can play in all phases of the disaster management cycle, they can transform their response efforts using a powerful portfolio of levers that build stronger, more equitable communities, ultimately enhancing their impact both during and after a crisis, fulfilling the company's responsibility to its stakeholders, and delivering on its purpose.

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ENDNOTES

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