

2/2/10: ReliefOversight.org site launches beta version as aid groups raise millions for Haiti quake

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 2, 2010

Contact:

Ben Smilowitz, 202-556-3023

ben@disasteraccountability.org

ReliefOversight.org site launches beta version as aid groups raise millions for Haiti quake

Independent, public-driven site monitors capacity and activities of relief groups on ground

A "beta" version of <http://www.ReliefOversight.org> is now live and ready for use and distribution. ReliefOversight.org is an initiative of the Disaster Accountability Project and part of an ongoing effort to increase transparency in disaster prevention, response, relief, and recovery systems through new media. ReliefOversight.org is an easy-to-search, publicly generated, data-driven application developed to monitor the activities and effectiveness of organizations soliciting donations for disaster relief.

"The goal is to increase transparency in disaster relief by providing an easier way for raw information from the ground to reach the public," said Ben Smilowitz, Executive Director of the Disaster Accountability Project. Smilowitz founded the Disaster Accountability Project after managing high-volume Red Cross sites in Mississippi in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and witnessing firsthand the bungled relief effort. "Some organizations are better than others in providing regular, accurate updates to the public. Some organizations have been operating on the ground in Haiti for years while other groups who are soliciting donations are visiting for the first time now. Each organization has different strengths and weaknesses and it is our goal that this website will be a clearinghouse for this information."

Background: While traditional NGO fundraising oversight has focused upon fiscal and governance issues to the exclusion of other issues, ReliefOversight.org provides a forum for updates about organizations activities on the ground from a number of sources and not only relief organizations themselves. Both relief organizations and potential donors will be able to use raw information on the site to make more informed decisions regarding partnerships and donations, and to identify other ways to support relief efforts.

After disasters, charities are heavily engaged in advertising for donations and may be less likely to reveal capacity limitations and difficulties delivering aid. While negative exposure could impact fundraising efforts, lives are jeopardized when problems go unreported. ReliefOversight.org's aggregation of updated and independent information in one location increases awareness of relief groups' actual efforts, empowering individuals and charities to engage to the greatest extent possible.

History: ReliefOversight.org development began about two weeks ago. A dedicated group of dozens of volunteers in over three countries and six states contributed their efforts to meet all programming, research, and data-entry needs. Volunteers are still adding and updating organization profiles and activity details. The site is ready for public participation and will develop more fully as others engage and add useful information.

Significant assistance was provided by the Crisis Commons community through Crisis Camps around the world. See: http://wiki.crisiscommons.org/wiki/Disaster_Accountability_Public_Database.

The Disaster Accountability Project (DAP) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to the improvement of disaster management systems through public accountability, citizen oversight and empowerment, whistle-blower engagement, and policy research and advocacy. The Disaster Accountability Project's website is <http://www.DisasterAccountability.org>.

The Disaster Accountability Project was founded after Hurricane Katrina to improve FEMA, American Red Cross, and the other government agencies and nonprofit organizations responsible for disaster preparedness, response, relief, and recovery. In two years, the Disaster Accountability Project has become the leading, independent nonprofit providing citizen oversight to the U.S. disaster management system. In August 2008, the Disaster Accountability Project received the prestigious Echoing Green Fellowship, awarded to social entrepreneurs tackling critical, high-impact social issues.

A toll-free hotline (866-9-TIP-DAP) is available as a public service for disaster survivors, workers and volunteers to report critical gaps in disaster prevention, response, relief, and recovery services or planning. The group is recruiting a national network of Disaster Accountability Monitors and Bloggers to help report, verify, and publicize gaps in disaster services or planning.

Disaster Accountability Project is a 2008 Echoing Green Fellowship Organization.
For more information: <http://www.echoinggreen.org/fellows/ben-smilowitz>

Idealist.org Interview from August 2008: <http://www.idealist.org/if/i/en/h/blog/-questions-with-ben-smilowitz-of-disaster-accountability-project>

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