

2/21/10 Chronicle of Philanthropy: Web Sites Hope to Enlist People in Haiti to Monitor...

Web Sites Hope to Enlist People in Haiti to Monitor Quality of Relief Efforts
By Caroline Preston Posted on the web on February 21, 2010

As scrutiny is intensifying over how the hundreds of millions in donations to Haiti relief efforts will be spent, several Web sites are now trying to help monitor the work by asking aid workers and Haitians to weigh in about what is going right and what is not.

Ben Smilowitz, founder of a nonprofit group that has monitored disaster relief in the United States since 2007, started a Web site to encourage aid workers to supply information about needs that have not been met and problems they see in the recovery effort.

ReliefOversight.org was created in the weeks after the earthquake, largely by volunteers. The site has profiles of aid groups and will be pulling information from charity Web sites and from reports relief groups produce to help aid workers and donors assess the relief effort.

Ushahidi, a Boston nonprofit group that was started to create online maps of outbreaks of violence after Kenya's contentious 2007 election, also has been gathering information on unmet needs since the earthquake hit. As Port-au-Prince moves from relief efforts to longer-term rebuilding, the Web site will undergo a transition, too, to assume more of an oversight role.

The charity is working with Haitian "hometown associations" groups of Haitians in Boston and elsewhere that support Haitian towns "to get the word out to people in the Caribbean nation about the opportunity to provide feedback on the relief efforts.

Getting Honest Feedback

Andrew Schroeder, director of research and analysis at the medical-aid group Direct Relief International, says more monitoring of relief efforts is good for both nonprofit groups and Haitians. But he says it will be difficult for ReliefOversight.org to gather solid evidence about what is not working from people who see problems in Haiti.

"It's hard to get at the higher-level issue of interpretation and outcomes," he says. "It would be worrisome to me to have whistleblowers acting on imperfect information."

Organizers of the Web sites say they are working to make them easier to use and are grappling with privacy issues.

Sandra Schimmelpfennig, an expert on aid who worked for the American Red Cross in Thailand after the tsunamis, warns that aid workers will not provide honest feedback unless they can be sure they cannot be identified from their comments.

Ms. Schimmelpfennig has taken a different approach to evaluation, creating a site called the Charity Rater that asks donors to fill out an online questionnaire to help them determine if a particular charity deserves their support.

Mr. Smilowitz says that even if his site, ReliefOversight.org, does not become a mainstream source for evaluating relief efforts, the role of online feedback from aid workers and the public will grow and could help to monitor disaster and antipoverty efforts around the globe.

“Part of the goal is to raise the standard of transparency in relief and get more mainstream oversight,” he says.