When disasters such as earthquakes or floods occur, various agencies rush to provide humanitarian aid (HA) to those affected, and frequently they make appeals to the public for donations. Yet questions have been raised about the effectiveness of the aid provided. In some cases, there are even concerns that in the long term more harm than good is done.

I will briefly describe the Humanitarian ‘system’ and some associated ethical questions, as well as the distinction between HA and development aid (DA). This will be followed by a discussion of some methodological issues in conducting evaluations of DA and HA. I propose an agenda for better understanding the effectiveness of HA for shelter after disaster, an important determinant of health. The agenda includes conducting randomized controlled trials.