

# Towards improved logistics: challenges and questions for logisticians and managers

by Donald Chaikin

*Effective programmes require efficient support functions. Logistics is a key support function and needs to be incorporated into planning and management decisions from inception to close-down.*

**L**ogistics questions affect timescales, appropriateness of supplies, methods of implementation, asset management and many other aspects integral to programme management.

The Fritz Institute's Humanitarian Logistics Council initiative [see pp37] to bring together logisticians is useful and productive. What we need now, however, is to **expand the discussion forum** to include management. Could this be a next step for the Council? In addition, logisticians themselves need to put time and effort into explaining and promoting the role of logistics within their organisations, making management more aware of the advantages - financial as well as technical - of logistics being fully integrated into their planning process.

Agencies need **logisticians with management experience**. Field logisticians are relatively easy to find but there is only a very small pool of management-level logisticians. One of the problems is that individuals - such as logisticians - get pigeonholed and it is hard for them to break out into management. Individuals in all disciplines need to be given the opportunity by agency managers to be encouraged/trained for management roles.

We need more **professionalism** in the sector - and for that professionalism to receive greater recognition. Certification may help in this (though proven hands-on experience remains essential), particularly in some regions where certification is culturally held in greater esteem. There are only a few logistics courses in Europe. The best ones are run by Bioforce<sup>1</sup> in

France - but in French and therefore not accessible to many. We need similar courses in other languages.

Agencies need to develop **emergency preparedness plans** in country - plans that include logistics. These should include developing local sources of supplies and agreeing specifications. Oxfam's logistics department is currently working with its eight Regional Management Centres to build up a database for each region. This resource should be shared among agencies.

Cooperation should be encouraged in other areas as well. Oxfam GB and the International Rescue Committee have collaborated on the development of an **IT logistics system** which has proved to be effective, fairly inexpensive and relatively painless to get underway. It was designed to support Oxfam/IRC's specific needs but other agencies such as Save the Children UK and the UK NGO Merlin have since expressed interest in it. It can be used off-line - an essential attribute if it is to be used effectively in many of the situations in which Oxfam's staff and

partners have to operate.

Are regional/global **pre-positioning units** necessary and/or desirable? They may prove useful in some cases but their usefulness may be restricted by shelf-life constraints; they may also require considerable financial investment, particularly where bonded warehouses have to be used. Agencies usually have some warning of impending emergencies and are often even able to get equipment out to the field in advance. Even in unexpected emergencies, Oxfam can activate charter flights within 24 hours and get emergency equipment from its warehouse near Oxford to any location within 2-3 days. If necessary, however, could agencies make use of the pre-positioning units of WFP, IFRC and World Vision, for example?

As head of logistics for Oxfam over the past six years, one of my key challenges has been to get the organisation to recognise logistics as a vital support function that needs to be incorporated into planning and management decisions. We've taken many steps in the right direction - but many challenges remain.

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1. See [www.bioforce.asso.fr](http://www.bioforce.asso.fr)

*Food aid in Malawi.*

