

Why logistics?

by Anisya Thomas

Two decades ago logistics was rarely a subject discussed in the executive suites of large corporations.

Often referred to as **shipping**, the function had a lowly place and logisticians were located in basements and at shipping docks. Today, logistics or supply chain management is recognised as a strategic and value-producing component in the overall operation of commercial organisations. Graduate and doctoral programmes at major universities assure ongoing research that documents and disseminates examples of best practice. There is a professional career path for logisticians, a number of magazines that chronicle their work and a community of peers that shares knowledge in meetings sponsored by organisations such as the Council of Logistics Management (CLM)¹.

Research conducted by Fritz Institute suggests that logistics is central to relief for several reasons:

- Logistics serves as a bridge between disaster preparedness and response through the establishment of effective procurement procedures, supplier relationships, prepositioned stock and knowledge of local transport conditions.
- The speed of response for major humanitarian programmes involving health, food, shelter, water and sanitation interventions is dependent on the ability of logisticians to procure, transport and receive supplies at the site of a humanitarian relief effort.
- Since the logistics department is usually involved in every stage of a relief effort, it is a rich repository of data that can be analysed to provide post-event learning.

Logistics data encompasses all aspects of execution, such as the effectiveness of suppliers and transportation providers, the cost and timeliness of relief efforts, the appropriateness of donated goods and information flows between the field, headquarters and donors. In a relief effort, logistics is the nexus of information for donors, operations managers, finance departments and field relief activities.

Despite being a critical function to the success of relief efforts, humanitarian logisticians are under-recognised and under-utilised in many humanitarian organisations. Often classified as a support function, their roles are confined to executing decisions after they have been made. This places an enormous burden on logisticians who have not been given an opportunity to articulate the physical constraints in the planning process. It also tends to cause tensions with people in programmes as they cannot understand delays and breakdowns in the supply delivery process.

This issue of FMR

Fritz Institute is very proud to sponsor this special issue of *Forced Migration Review* in which the crucial role of humanitarian logistics is discussed in the voices of logisticians who have been part of practically every major relief effort over the past decade. We believe that the perspective of the logistician is a strategic and central component to the planning of effective relief efforts. The articles in this issue highlight the multidimensional challenges facing humanitarian logisticians as well as their ingenuity, commitment and heart as they rise to meet the challenges.

This special issue is organised into four broad sections. It begins with a series of personal observations by practitioners at World Vision, IRC and Oxfam about the state of their field and ideas that can help advance the practice of humanitarian logistics. These include: creating a community of practice, greater investments in technology and preparedness, and pleas for recognition and voice.

Next, it profiles concerted and organised efforts to broaden the role of logistics at the UN, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the World Food Programme, highlighting progress and delineating some challenges that remain. This section concludes with an example of an innovative logistics collaboration to achieve better coordination among humanitarian



players participating in relief in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The third section discusses dilemmas facing the relief community, such as the GMO issue in southern Africa and its implications for logisticians.

Finally, some practical possibilities for the execution of effective logistics are detailed including some innovative uses of technology.

The people who made it possible

Many have gone above and beyond the call of duty to make this special issue possible. The editorial team at *Forced Migration Review* has been the anchor on which we have all relied. The authors of the articles and those who submitted pieces we could not include deserve special recognition. Their work was done after-hours, often in the field during time they did not have. Ricardo Ernst, my fellow guest editor, has been an able partner responding with feedback from all corners of the globe. The Fritz Institute team, and especially Ivy Cohen, has provided ideas and input crucial to pulling the images and words together. A special thanks is also due to Lynn Fritz whose commitment, philanthropy and vision to further the cause of the humanitarian logistician has made this special issue possible.

Most importantly this issue is a salute to the work of humanitarian logisticians who work each day in countless ways to ensure speedier relief for vulnerable people. Your teams and organisations are enriched by the presence of logisticians. Take one out to lunch today.

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1. See www.clm1.org