



Humanitarian Supply Chains

In terms of natural hazards and their impact, 2008 was one of the most devastating years, while 2009 did not experience so-called 'mega-disasters'¹. This year, however, has started in the worst possible way with earthquakes and floods. In 2009, 335 natural disasters were reported worldwide, killing 10 655 persons, affecting more than 119 million others and causing over US\$ 41.3 billion economic damages². In general due to the changing nature of the disasters and improving early warning systems the number of people killed has reduced while an increasing number of survivors mean that more people than ever before are in need of local, regional and global humanitarian assistance.

Logistics is central to providing humanitarian assistance. The way that supply chains are operated has a massive impact on the speed and quality of the assistance that can be provided. In addition logistics activities (from purchasing to the last-mile delivery of items) account for a very large share of the cost in a disaster relief operation. Any improvement in the way logistics provides humanitarian assistance has the potential to deliver a huge positive impact for people affected. As a research area, however; humanitarian logistics and supply chain management remains largely underestimated even if the Asian-Pacific Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Pakistan made researchers as well as the public in general more aware of logistical challenges and opportunities in disaster relief. There is an increasing awareness as to the link between preparedness, response and recovery in that the better logistics preparedness, the better and quicker response and the better response, the earlier recovery back towards a normal state can occur. Furthermore, links between disaster relief and longer term development in countries are increasingly acknowledged as so sadly demonstrated in the recent devastating Haitian earthquake. One of the most important tasks for organizations is to help the people in Haiti building their own capacity so they are better prepared for the next disaster.

The reason why we accepted being guest editors of this special issue is the need for combining theory and practice in humanitarian logistics with more papers being based on in-depth empirical knowledge combined with theory development. Whether we succeeded is up to the readers to judge. From our perspective we would have wanted to see more of the humanitarian logistics practice in the papers submitted. There has been an explosion in the number of special issues on humanitarian logistics the past two years, possibly resulting in demand exceeding supply of good papers, to be honest. Even if this special issue adds to the large number of papers being published these days, we would still like to put forward a small 'warning' – let not humanitarian logistics research become all about publications in scientific journals – let us all keep in mind the ultimate goal: the livelihoods and lives of beneficiaries.



1. *World Disaster Report 2009 – Focus on early warning, early action. International Federation Red Cross Red Crescent Societies, Geneva.*

2. *Vos, F., Rodrigues, J., Below, R. and Guha-Sapir, D. Annual Disaster Statistical Review 2009: The Numbers and Trends. Brussels: CRED; 2010.*

Simultaneously with conferences and journals requesting papers, the humanitarian logistics practitioners and the responding agencies have been in great demand particularly in 2010. With Haiti and Chile earthquakes striking almost at the same time and now also the floods in Pakistan, we have seen herds of humanitarian logistics practitioners taking off for missions, simultaneously with herds of researchers and conference organizers knocking on doors of organizations and their employees for data and presentations.

There is no doubt that the needs of the beneficiaries have to be prioritized over research projects' and researchers' need for data and time from practice. However, for the purpose of assisting the beneficiaries, which is what all – academics and practitioners alike – want to do, we need to find ways to work in the future so that

- Practitioners do their best in providing 'better, faster, cheaper' both during and between disasters.
- Researchers develop and disseminate tools and principles through teaching and publications which can then be used by practitioners in finding new solutions.

It is a challenge for both, and one which we should solve together. Through hard work, a bit of patience and innovative ways of working it should be possible to provide useful research applications based on sound empirical evidence.

The content of this special issue is a small step in this common vision, combining conceptual work with empirical cases.

The first paper sets the stage and is written by **Brian Majewski, Kaustubh Navangul and Ian Heigh** concerning the future of humanitarian logistics. It is based on a macro-level quantitative study of the needs in disaster relief logistics in the years to come.

In the second paper, **Andrew Choi, Anthony Beresford, Stephen Pettit and Fahd Bayusuf** present an interesting case from Rwanda focusing on the operation of food aid in different phases after the civil war.

This is followed by **Gyöngyi Kovacs and Peter Tatham's** paper about humanitarian logistics skills and competencies, lack of good humanitarian logisticians being one of the constraints in disaster relief.

Then in the fourth paper, **Orla Stapleton, Luk N. Van Wassenhove and Rolando Tomasini**, introduce us to another important resource in humanitarian logistics, namely the role of private companies.

Finally, the fifth part of this issue is a **case study** on challenges and possible solutions to drug distribution in the poorest region in north-east Uganda which attempts to provide insights of doing research in the humanitarian logistics context.

The editorial team would like to express our sincere thanks to all reviewers including (in alphabetical order) Andreas Brekke, Anthony Beresford, Arni Haldorsson, Arvinder Loomba, Brian Majewski, Erica Gralla, Gyöngyi Kovacs, Leif Magnus Jensen, Karen Spens, Langdon Greenhalgh, Paulo Goncalves, Peter Tatham, Sabine Schulz, Tore Listou and Luk van Wassenhove with his team at INSEAD. They did a great and timely job in providing constructive feedback to the authors.

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