

Chapter 69

Strategic Partners and Strange Bedfellows: Relationship Building in the Relief Supply Chain

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is about relationship building in relief supply chains. Its primary purpose is to present and discuss the author's actor-based typology of humanitarian relationships. The framework includes relationships among NGOs, as well as between NGOs and UN agencies, military units, and business firms. Examples are used to explore unique issues in the various types of relationships. One particular NGO, Airline Ambassadors International, is offered as an example of an NGO that builds relationships with a wide variety of humanitarian actors. The chapter also examines compatibility and complementarity of organizations across the three phases of humanitarian work: preparation, response, and recovery or development. Research opportunities are discussed in the concluding comments.

INTRODUCTION

At 4:53 p.m. January 12, 2010, an earthquake of over 7.0 on the Richter scale hit Haiti. It struck 17 km. south-west of Port-au-Prince, the capital city, in an area with more than 2 million people. After the earthquake, electricity was unavailable

and communications were difficult. According to initial reports, there was wide-spread damage and many casualties. The Port-au-Prince airport could accommodate radio-assisted, line-of-sight landings only. For now, it would be open only for humanitarian assistance flights. All roads to the capital were partially blocked by debris and other obstacles. United Nations agencies and the International Federation of the Red Cross and

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Red Crescent Society (IFRC) were preparing to deploy teams and material aid, from a regional hub in Panama (OCHA 2010a).

Two days later, access became feasible and needs began to be assessed. The initial priorities included search-and-rescue assistance, as well as teams with heavy-lifting equipment, medical assistance and supplies. Access to people in need remained difficult due to debris and obstacles on the roads. At this point, The United Nations Office of the Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) announced: *“Logistics and the lack of transport remain the key constraints to the delivery of aid.”* Displaced persons were scattered across multiple locations. Temporary shelters were urgently needed. Fifteen sites were identified for distribution of relief items. By the fourth day the World Food Programme (WFP) had reached 13,000 people with food, jerry cans and water purification tablets. The UN Disaster and Assessment Coordination (UNDAC) team and OCHA teams were on the ground in Haiti; and the following announcement was made: *“Coordination of assistance is vital”* (OCHA 2010b).

Like many prior disasters, all over the world, the 2010 Haiti earthquake shows once again that logistics and supply chain management are critical to effective delivery of humanitarian relief. Moreover, supply chain coordination across a wide variety of organizations offering assistance is needed to save as many lives and ease as much suffering as possible, in light of fiscal, material and personnel limits. While logistical considerations are critical, Spring (2006), drawing on information from the Fritz Institute, suggests that humanitarian aid agencies are twenty years behind the large corporations in adopting today’s fundamental tools of logistics and supply chain management.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss a range of relationship issues within humanitarian relief supply chains. The remainder is organized as follows. The second and third sections present a brief contrast of humanitarian logistics vs. business logistics and an abbreviated review of

relationship building literature, respectively. This sets the stage for the author’s actor-based typology of humanitarian supply chain relationships, in section IV. Section V discusses relationship building across four phases of humanitarian action, and then section VI provides a summary and conclusions.

HUMANITARIAN LOGISTICS VS. BUSINESS LOGISTICS

According to Pettit and Beresford (2005, p. 314), “There are clear parallels between business logistics and relief logistics, but the transfer of knowledge between the two has been limited and the latter remains relatively unsophisticated.”

Kovács and Spens (2007) discuss several important differences between business logistics and humanitarian logistics. While business logisticians work with predetermined actors or partners and predictable demand, humanitarians deal with unknown or changing actors and unpredictable demand. Aid agencies receive many unsolicited and sometimes even unwanted donations, such as: drugs and foods past their expiry dates; laptops needing electricity where infrastructure has been destroyed; and heavy clothing not suitable for tropical regions. Compared to their business counterparts, humanitarian logisticians have greater challenges in collaboration and coordination of effort. Coordination of many different aid agencies, suppliers, and local and regional actors, all with their own ways of operating and own structures can be very challenging. Descriptions of relief operations frequently criticize aid agencies for their lack of collaboration, redundancies, and duplicated efforts and materials.

McLachlin, Larson and Khan (2009) offer a framework in which differences between business and humanitarian logistics largely follow from two dimensions: motivation (profit versus not-for-profit) and environment (uninterrupted versus interrupted). In business logistics, actors

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