



## Potential for optimisation in disaster logistics?

Shortly after the turn of the year, shocking news and images reached us of the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti. Reports about the victims and the destruction of infrastructure horrified the entire world and aid and manpower is still being sent to the island state from almost all around the world. As time went on, reports also increasingly focused on the supply logistics, bringing it to the attention of everyone who was following the events. Far too often, however, there were negative comments on the organisation and co-ordination of the distribution of aid. There were widespread misunderstandings and the words "it really can't be that difficult" were uttered in many interviews and written in reports and on forums. Debates about the lack of optimisation of costs and time in planning and co-ordinating deployment also arose. But did these critical voices ever spend enough time considering how difficult an aid operation like this is? Can they really assume that setting up functioning and optimised logistics in the event of a disaster is not a standard procedure for the humanitarian aid organisations, the UN or even the US army?

In fact the various organisations are very well prepared. However, it is very difficult to define a detailed standard process for disasters because they are all so different. Every new deployment is full of unknowns that need to be taken into account in the supply chain of aid staff and materials. Flexibility is an important issue in logistics - but the people providing aid simply do not have the time to spend ages worrying about process design and choice of location while considering cost optimisation. Instead, quick strategic decisions appropriate to the geographic circumstances are critical, not just for the victims but also in terms of the service life of the aid parcels which can suffer from external influences such as heat and humidity. Airports and harbours are the main strategic locations for bringing international aid supplies into the country. If even these are destroyed, alternatives must be found quickly, which also usually depends on the original condition of the infrastructure. Although we are now able to send out aid internationally within just a few hours, infrastructure that is in a fundamentally parlous state, roads that are destroyed or blocked, dilapidated bridges, lack of local knowledge as well as an angry population can cause major obstacles and delays to the "last mile" - the last part of the supply chain to those affected. In terms of fair distribution, therefore, even establishing some form of reporting (who has already received aid, who has not) and the necessary supervision of the distribution are part of the logistics tasks. If, with all this, it is only possible to count on the local government or organisations to a limited extent because they too require assistance, planning becomes even more difficult. Furthermore, in addition to constructing a distribution system, the provision and safety of one's own aid team must not be forgotten as they too will need sustenance and the opportunity to withdraw after psychologically and physically draining deployments. In short, there is an enormous need for planning and co-ordination in a minimum of time - concessions have to be made!

To give the critics a little satisfaction I am more than willing to grant that there is always potential for optimisation. But I am certain that the aid workers will perform their own evaluations to identify this potential. The fact, however, is that the aid workers are courageously giving their all despite the extraordinary situation. They were on the scene quickly, adjusted to the unknown challenges extremely rapidly and, aside from all the cost considerations and potential for optimisation, they are doing what is most important in a catastrophe like this - they are not just talking about it, they are helping!

Yours,  
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