

A Planning Approach to Humanitarian Logistics

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ABSTRACT

In humanitarian events, logistics is traditionally considered at time of crisis, and at the tail-end of a project design with little to no strategic, logistical forethought applied. Introducing risk assessment and integrating logistics planning with program plans and training to these plans prior to disaster striking offers a more impactful response at time of disaster. This can be introduced in high risk countries through one on one training, simple templates, spreadsheets and standardized processes—a low to no technological, and highly relational method of building capacity and increasing the impact of an organization's response to beneficiaries.

Keywords

Humanitarian logistics, logistics planning, risk assessment, internal readiness, logistics preparedness, logistics requirements list, built-in flexibility

INTRODUCTION

Within the humanitarian community, predominately, logistics has been approached as a 7-Eleven super store that you walk into at the very tail end of all decisions being made, and submit your list of physical components to purchase for a project. Very little is commonly considered in relation to the strategic implications of logistics and logistical innovations within programs, where purchasing and movement of people and goods might leverage improvements within the implementation of one's program. There persists a bound and static understanding of the science of logistics as separate pieces of unconnected tasks that must be completed out of necessity, after the program plan is built. This approach has lacked the ability to empower programs to innovate and improve delivery of programs in ways that actually leverages the potential to profoundly impact a better accommodation of the beneficiary in their places of need.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO LOGISTICS

The knowledge and emphasis on the importance of logistics, generally, varies in the humanitarian industry. However, overall, logistics remains an overlooked, underdefined and inadequately resourced area for impacting quality of beneficiary assistance during disasters.

The traditional way of operating predominantly relies on at-time-of-disaster planning and decision making. Additionally, it depends on experts in community programming writing a proposal that includes the logistical elements. This commonly will be a few line items for the cost of materials, transportation, and timeline for purchase submitted to the logistics officer with 0 to 7 days to 'make it happen'. A study conducted by University of Washington's School of HCDE in conjunction with World Vision's emergency logistics team found that, in fact, the majority of strategic logistics decisions were made by program officers with limited view of logistics systems cause and effects, and limited knowledge of current resources or any other logistically innovative approaches. Additionally, the project-by-project approach to which NGOs are often tethered to due to the way donor funding works, results in the inability for organizations to view and operate the logistical components of response as a whole, much less as a science.

Responding to emergencies, no matter what perspective you come from, is expensive. There are numerous studies indicating the cost of response, particularly out of the Tsunami and attributing the largest percentages of costs to logistics. The traditional assess-and-decide-at-time-of-crisis reduces an organization's ability to reduce costs, as well as have flexibility to meet the greater demand. It can leave an organization, for example, in a position where purchasing can only happen when the demand is high and costs are higher; or exponentially

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decrease the human output to your beneficiary care as the staff 's time is consumed trying to create new processes to meet the demand on the fly.

A PLANNING APPROACH TO HUMANITARIAN LOGISTICS

I recently introduced a logistics preparedness methodology as head of World Vision emergency logistics preparedness and planning team. It is designed as a six week up-front program with the main components consisting of pre-event work within:

- Disaster Risk Assessments
- Disaster Programming Plans
- External Logistics Capacity Assessment
- Establishment of Internal readiness, emergency procedures, and surge mechanisms
- Logistics Plan and Checklists

It is an overall planning approach and necessarily, a logistics preparedness plan comes from the programs plans, which are developed from a country's specific disaster risks.

PHASE 1 - Research and Preparation

High disaster risk countries are selected to participate. The month prior to an in-country project, introduction of preparedness and planning concepts and expected activities are shared with the national office (NO) logistics manager, and leadership, and the participating regional logisticians for preparation of the project team's arrival. Two weeks will be set aside for secondary source data research on any existing disaster risk assessments, logistics assessments and Govt or UN contingency plans prior to country arrival. The NO logisticians supports by providing existing country and NO information and documents, making contact with other NGOs and UN agencies regarding current assessment work. The project reviews an office's previous Lessons Learned in the area of Logistics and Supply Chain.

PHASE 2 - Capacity & Risks Assessment & Sector Needs

The initial phase in-country focuses on understanding the country-specific context and identifying the organizational targets, needs and challenges in logistics:

- Disaster risk of the country, including context and scenarios
- NO programme plans for meeting the disaster needs
- The Logistics Requirements List

This phase consists of sessions discussing the country's primary risks and scenarios, meeting with the programming teams and leadership to discuss risks and the disaster program expected plans. Putting together draft proposals, logical frames in advance is a key take away for the program officers. Often times this may be the first time it has been looked at from a disaster risk perspective, as well, this is an important point of early collaboration across the functions that is essential to the success of planning. Out of the plans is established what I have coined the *logistics requirements list*. It includes planning throughput and timeline expectations and serves as the foundational direction for the project activities and planning.

PHASE 3 - External Logistics Capacity Assessment

Building on the research done prior to arriving in country, this phase consists primarily of validating the external logistics capacity assessment data, training participating logisticians on conducting rapid assessments and how to verify capacity assessments of a country's logistics capabilities. This phase begins with classroom instruction on assessments, but predominately consists of on the ground travel throughout the country to key ports, vendors, logistics partners and Government agencies for data collection and verification. Senior Logisticians have the opportunity to lead the less experienced logisticians in various areas of specialization. We conclude with data synthesis, and a mapping exercise. The outputs of the work done in this phase include an updated/revised country Logistics Capacity Assessment, country infrastructure map and known regional and national

resource/vendor lists. All data which is necessary in the next section for establishing plans, a preferred vendor lists, determining prepositioning and other surge strategies.

PHASE 4 - Internal Readiness

The team conducts an assessment of the internal systems, procedures, and surge capacities of the organization's functions that are critical for effective Logistics operations during a disaster with emphasis on the following areas:

- Leadership Decision-Making
- Current In-place Transport Mechanisms (Fleet Management and surge capacity)
- Procurement Process & Set-up (Vendor Management, Rapid Procurement, Warehousing)
- Emergency Funding Mechanisms
- Logistics Staff Surge Mechanisms
- External Relationships (Government, Vendors, UN, Donor, NGOs, CBOs etc).
- Information Management

Instruction and training is provided in these areas of assessment. Checklists and various best practices, tools and solutions for strengthening emergency logistics capacity and readiness are offered.

PHASE 5 - Logistics Plan and Action Plan

With a logistics requirements list, an understanding of the current state of resources and the capability and capacity gaps identified, we can build a plan. We walk the team through logistics planning for scenarios identified. This includes:

- Understanding planning assumptions, and the notion of what I am calling "Built-In Flexibility"
- Determining throughput requirements, priorities and timeline
- Identifying key set-up locations for logistical hubs and sub-hubs
- Determining alternative transport resources in the case of non-functioning traditional routes,
- Establishing logical plans for prepositioning based on expected gap in external resource flows
- A Logistics Manager Checklist is introduced and customized for use during disaster.

Finally the plan developed translates to an action plan of tasks to be completed for process adjustments and tools, relational or partnership initiatives to establish in peace-time, and pre-arranged internal processes, approvals, and templates.

PHASE 6 - Follow-up & Mentorship

The organization next assigns a more experienced logistician to provide mentorship and support to the newly trained logisticians within the National office. The Project Manager continues to advise and assist the NO with needed resources (expertise, tools, other opportunities) as well as monitoring NO progress until all agreed upon recommendations of the action plan are complete. The NO provides quarterly updates of their successes and achievements on the action plan.

CONCLUSION

The ultimate project goal is to enhance disaster response effectiveness and efficiency and build emergency logistics capacity through logistics assessments, planning and preparedness in three high-risk with many of the benefits indicated in Table 1.

Outcome 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A comprehensive view of the country and national office logistics infrastructure, resources, capacity and limitations.
Output	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Country Logistics Capacity Assessment (LCA) • Closer collaboration between organization's internal functions + teams • Tools and templates of best practices, recommendations for application
Outcome 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of logistics preparedness strategy and Integration of Logistics Planning with Organization's wider response strategy
Output	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logistics planning designed into programmes • Disaster plans with logistical components • Logistics Emergency Preparedness and Response Checklist
Outcome 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An advanced level of logistics competencies resides in the region and regional logisticians, with increased ability to support other NOs during emergencies.
Output	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A larger pool of trained emergency logisticians within the region • Advanced tools and training for logisticians that can be passed to their national offices and deployed locations
Outcome 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative feedback received for the improvement of logistics services
Output	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lessons learned from the NO Logisticians • Critical feedback on logistics services needed • Improved tools for Assessment and Planning

Table 1: Project Outcomes & Outputs

Feedback gained through the University of Washington study within World Vision highlighted the value of a preparedness and planning approach:

“It would be unreasonable to expect [an organization] to move goods internationally at the same speed that national offices can move prepositioned local goods. However, the story above further emphasizes the importance of preparedness and planning services, such as external and internal logistics assessments, logistics planning, and pre-positioning plans. These preparedness services could equip more national offices to be able to reach more beneficiaries within the 24-48 hour window, effectively handle small-scale emergency logistics, and to pass along this capacity building to local offices.”

Investing in putting systems in place, training and practicing bring a much stronger value proposition to an organization. I like to tell my logisticians that speeding as fast you can on the expressway requires that someone first paved the road. The more that can be put in place prior to a disaster, although it may change, is something that will not have to be done at time of crisis. The team is freed up to apply their time to driving the vehicle versus building the road. In the end, when the office gets a taste of preparedness and planning, they like what they experience. In the World Vision study, Rebecca Walton notes:

“A strong theme across field interviews, illustrating a desire for more of these types of support....desire that validates [our organization's] heightened attention on training and preparedness services. In addition to the value of logistics and preparedness training, these quotes reveal a field desire for training that provides a more standardized set of practices that are in place and localized to the region.”

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