Before the Disaster Hits: Logistical Planning for a Disaster Relief Effort

By Aurora Balliu

When disaster strikes your nation, who can you call on for help? During the past few decades, the number of natural disasters occurring has quadrupled.\(^1\) With increasing collaboration between countries, the need for better humanitarian relief assistance is becoming ever more important.\(^2\) Supply chain management entails more than delivering goods to the consumer. The process is an orchestration between transportation, distribution, delivery and storage, while minimizing costs and serving the greatest number of consumers possible. Supply chain management is a “desperate balancing act when human life is at stake.”\(^3\) The entire focus of disaster response is on the supply chain. But moving relief items into a disaster affected area is considerably more arduous than any typical commercial supply chain operation.\(^4\) Through this interview with Mr. Kevin Horrocks, Logistics Manager for Samaritan’s Purse, one can see a personal account of the planning that takes place for an emergency relief operation with a successful non-profit organization.

**Q: What steps go into planning for an emergency relief?**

A: “Preparing for an emergency response is not necessarily a step-by-step process. It is an ongoing, ever changing process that evolves over time based on resources available and the expertise of the staff involved.”

“Our systems are modeled after the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) response systems. When a disaster happens, two primary teams are put into action. First, an Incident Management Team (IMT) will meet here at headquarters to begin making decisions about how to respond. This team consists of five members from different functions areas: Response Manager, Program Coordinator, Logistics Coordinator, Admin/Finance Coordinator and Information Coordinator. These folks work together to determine the level of response, and then will deploy a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to the affected zone. The positions on this DART mirror those on the IMT and are responsible for putting the plans into action.”

**Q: What type of training is involved when creating the DART?**

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A: “The number one resource we have is people. We need to have trained individuals who are capable of handling the pressures and rigors of disaster response. We have training classes designed and implemented that move from DART 101 to DART 501 and cover the basics of disaster response up to specific job functions for each person on the IMT and DART. In order to keep our skills fresh, we run table-top exercises approximately twice per year. Most recently we simulated an event in Indonesia and worked through this training to simulate the actions we would take. Even though it is a simulation, it sure does get the blood flowing!”

“Taking the training to the next level involves multi-day simulation exercises that allow the participants to hone their skills by simulating assessment, distribution, medical triage and intervention as well as improving their interpersonal skills. This is important not only to function better as a team, but to be able to more effectively care for the person in need. This past April, we held a week long training and simulation in York, South Carolina where we brought in 100 disaster trained staff from around the world. Perhaps this video can give a bit more detail into what that simulation looked like and sought to accomplish.”

Q: Beyond the trainings, what areas do staff members of Samaritan’s Purse work in to help the company prepare for a disaster?

A: “We have staff that work full-time to help us be prepared. Whether it is searching through years of data on international disasters or establishing new procedures for medical responses, these folks devote their time to being ready to go at a moment’s notice and responding in the best way possible. Doing this type of research allows us to focus on disaster prone areas and try to establish guidelines for responding in those areas. Personally, my job as Logistics Manager at Samaritan’s Purse is to manage a network of pre-positioned supply warehouses around the world and to build relationships with air carriers in order to respond quickly. I also serve as the Logistics Coordinator on the IMT in the event of a disaster. Pre-positioning is one of the biggest reasons we can respond quickly and effectively. Having items that we can deploy within 48 – 72 hours makes a difference in the number of lives we can save.”

Q: What external factors affect emergency relief logistics?

“Once a disaster strikes, a logistician’s job is to get needed supplies into the affected area as quickly as possible. Factors that may affect this goal include infrastructure challenges (damaged runways at airports, damaged docks at port, impassable roadways, availability of airlift capacity into the affected area) and governmental challenges. These governmental challenges may be caused by a country being overwhelmed and not able to manage the flow of goods into the country. Customs often is not functioning, and if it is, the systems are not functioning well. Corruption is always a huge challenge to logistics. While we would like to believe that everyone in the affected country would want to expedite the handling of goods to those in need, many times individuals become opportunistic and try to put some cash into their own pockets. This especially poses a challenge for organizations like Samaritan’s Purse that will not pay bribes.”

“Another external challenge would be a disaster’s effect on the amount of available relief items (blankets, soap, food, water, etc.) in the country or from other sources. Many organizations, like Samaritan’s Purse, have at least one pre-positioned supply warehouse stocked with these items. However, when a large event happens, similar to the 2011 Japan tsunami or the 2010 Haiti earthquake, these stocks are quickly depleted. There then becomes a competitive situation...
(supply and demand!) where many organizations are vying for the same production capacity of relief supply manufacturers. Who wins? It is usually handled on a “first come-first served” basis.”

**Q: Are there any risks to consider when conducting emergency relief efforts? If so, what are they?**

A: “Security would be the number one risk in a disaster situation. When hurting people are thrown into a situation where they can no longer obtain food, are dealing with death of loved ones, or are themselves injured, they can become desperate. This desperation can manifest itself in the form of violence and thievery. And it is understandable – who wouldn’t fight for their lives or the lives of their children?) In conducting food distributions, care must be taken into this effort to avoid a mob and an emergency exit strategy must be in place so relief workers are not put in harm’s way.”

“After an earthquake, one of the largest risks is that of experiencing aftershocks. We had a team in Japan just a couple days after the tsunami when a strong aftershock struck in the night. Our team had to evacuate their shelter for safety. In many countries in Southeast Asia, rains cause flooding and there is significant risk of our staff being caught up in that. There is also a risk that relief items may be stolen by a gang of desperate refugees or that customs may not allow items into their country without large amounts of ‘duty’ and ‘taxes’ being paid.”

**Q: What is different about the planning process for emergency relief when working with countries that are not yet developed?**

A: “The reality is that working in underdeveloped countries in a disaster response is easier in many ways. Logistically, there are additional challenges such as poor roads and lack of available resources, but overall, there is less government regulation and fewer systems to slow down a response. In regards to the planning process, the major difference is in knowing that we will need to bring resources with us. This would include the ability to purify water, vehicles for personnel transport, trucks for moving goods to recipients and all the items we plan to distribute.”

**Q: How and what have you learned from previous disasters to better prepare your planning for the future?**

A: “After each disaster response, we have an After-Action Review (AAR) with all IMT and DART team members. This gives us an opportunity to look at the entire process and evaluate the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ and develop action plans to improve. I am really not at liberty to get into specifics, but I can tell you that one major lesson learned is in regards to sending a DART team into countries where we already have an established office. This can cause some conflict because it gives the appearance that the country office is not equipped to handle the response themselves. This may or may not be true, however, we learned to be much more sensitive to the office staff and allow them to begin the response immediately. We (the IMT) support them with a DART team when the response becomes bigger than can be managed through that office.”

**Q: What needs to be improved upon in regard to planning for an emergency relief?**

A: “Coordination.”
“You’d probably get that same answer from the UN if you had the chance to ask. Every relief organization has a unique identity although a similar mission: to save lives and reduce suffering. The unique identity however can lead to ineffective disaster response if you look at the big picture. You’d find many organizations doing similar things in different ways. The job gets done, but how much better could it be if these organizations worked together in the planning and preparation stage and could improve working relationships once on the ground? “

“Organizations can coordinate better and should in order to have the most effective response possible. This can be in the form of sharing resources or sharing knowledge. There have been efforts to do this sort of thing, but none have really been able to bridge the gap. One such effort, and one of the most successful, is the logistics cluster supported by WFP. This cluster helps to coordinate logistics efforts in disasters.”

Conclusion

Logistics is possibly the most important factor of humanitarian aid, accounting for 80% of disaster relief operations. Planning the logistics of a disaster relief is an on-going process where one must consider a “plethora of possible outcomes or contingencies.” This area of emergency relief has “undoubtedly saved lives before.” Although recently organizations have bettered the supply chain operations when handling disasters, improvements that need to be made are still bountiful. “The time to help is before anything happens.” Through research we have learned that early response, including sending out trained staff as early as possible, is critical. Organizations must take the advice of Samaritan’s Purse and realize the value of an Emergency Preparedness plan. “Too many of these are little more than bureaucratic white papers that sit in binders on office shelves, and are of little use in the case of an emergency that really requires advance planning.” Collaboration must occur amongst relief organizations to allow for cohesiveness among multiple supply chains. Doing so will provide those involved in a disaster with the best and fastest aid possible.

References


**Author Biography**

Aurora Balliu recently graduated with an MBA at Appalachian State University. She also received her undergraduate degree from Appalachian in Business Management and Dance. She was involved heavily in extracurricular activities as President of Sigma Iota Epsilon, Marketing Director of Pi Sigma Epsilon, ASU Dancer, and perhaps her most important extracurricular role, mentor to a young girl through the Western Youth Network. She also traveled internationally on study abroad programs to both Vietnam and London. Aurora is currently pursuing international work where she would be able to better the lives of others.