Developing the case for humanitarian aid

What happens when disaster strikes? How do relief agencies ensure the right help is delivered as quickly and effectively as possible? A unique case series produced at INSEAD, with support from Fritz Institute, addresses these logistical challenges.

When Luk Van Wassenhove, the Henry Ford Chaired Professor of Manufacturing at INSEAD, announced in 2002 that he needed to go to Afghanistan to work on a new case, there were some raised eyebrows. Was Luk crazy? Would he be in danger? Did the school's insurance cover extend to such a region in conflict?

Luk was undeterred. A trip to the field was essential. Without first hand exposure to the conditions faced by the remarkable relief personnel on the ground, Luk knew it would be difficult to really understand the logistics challenges they face. Having already worked on three initial cases, looking at the logistics of humanitarian aid and disaster relief, Luk wanted to study, in a real disaster situation, the rollout of the United Nations Joint Logistics Centre (UNJLC), a concept formalised in March 2002 and described in the third case in the series.

In developing these cases, Luk Van Wassenhove had, first and foremost, been pursuing an individual research interest, reinforced by a desire to bring together the worlds of business knowledge and humanitarian aid. In his words: “The science of supply chain management in business has advanced so much in the last ten years, especially through the use of IT. How can we use this knowledge to help in the humanitarian context, where no science of disaster logistics yet exists? By contrast”, he continues, “business supply chains have been repeatedly disturbed by man-made and natural disasters (eg September 11th). Thus they have inadvertently tended to take on the characteristics of disaster supply chains. How can business, therefore, also learn from the experiences of the humanitarian world that must so often operate in a framework of disaster?”

Luk Van Wassenhove also recognised a clear need in the classroom. Students continue to demonstrate a growing interest in non-profit and humanitarian organisations and regard post MBA employment in these organisations as an increasingly attractive option. But there are very few cases available to teach in this area. The bargaining interest in corporate social responsibility (CSR) means that interest among business executives and leaders on executive education programmes also continues to grow. Most significantly, the humanitarian organisations themselves have no such training materials to work with.

Carrying out research is a critical factor in developing an effective case. Getting the right contacts to ensure that the necessary research can take place and securing adequate funding are also crucial ingredients and particularly challenging in such a specialised and largely non-profit area as humanitarian aid. Funding case writing, in particular, is an ongoing problem. INSEAD provides some resources and contributed to this case series, but there are few organisations, outside the business school, which have the expertise and desire to support the development of cases in the humanitarian area with vital contacts and additional funds.

Mission to strengthen the infrastructure of HROs

San Francisco based Fritz Institute played a pivotal role in making the cases happen. When Lynn Fritz created the Institute in November 2001, he gave it the mission of “strengthening the infrastructure of humanitarian relief organisations by mobilising logistics and technology expertise and resources from the corporate and academic communities”. According to Fritz Institute statistics, in 2001 alone, floods affected 34 million people; drought and famine affected 86 million people; earthquakes affected 19 million people. Yet even with the world’s media now able to alert the international community, within hours, to these disasters and cases of civil conflict and war, and, in spite of the willingness of many donors to provide rapid financial and material aid, the founders of Fritz Institute had for some time recognised the limiting factors that humanitarian relief organisations (HROs) consistently face in their ability to deliver this aid.

Dr Aniya Thomas, Managing Director of Fritz Institute, who has been involved since its inception, encapsulates the challenge as “making aid effective”. The unique approach of Fritz Institute has been to try to develop tools and support the
humanitarian relief process while adding to the body of knowledge. In September 2003, it launched customised Humanitarian Logistics Software, developed in collaboration with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

So why also support case development? According to Dr. Thomas, "logistics is central to the activity of HROs and strategic to their missions. However, our research has shown that the role and significance of logistics is not well understood or appreciated in most HROs, or by the donors who provide the financial support for the relief". Dr. Thomas highlights the critical educational need in the organisations themselves. "HROs have a value system at their heart and their staff are uniquely motivated and do unbelievable things. If their work in the field is to be supported by the knowledge of best practice, there is a need for teaching materials to be used in the training of these people. Before these cases were written, such materials did not exist".

Initiative brings together key academics and representatives

Fritz Institute approached Luk Van Wassenhove as part of its programme of understanding best practice in supply chain management and logistics, and bringing leading academics in the field together with key representatives of HROs and corporations. Key contacts were made and the case series was born.

The first set of two cases, published in 2002, looked at the disaster responses of the International Federation of The Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). The first case, IFRC – Choreographer of Disaster Management: Preparing for Tomorrow’s Disasters, examines the events around Hurricane Mitch. A lack of preparedness, and a consequent slow and inadequate response to the sudden onset of disaster, led to criticism from the media and international community. As a result, the IFRC reorganised and started to build capabilities in logistics. The second case, IFRC – Choreographer of Disaster Management: The Gujarat Earthquake, reveals how, just a few years after Hurricane Mitch, better prepared logistics mobilisation and response were able to react in a coordinated way to a dramatic humanitarian disaster.

Cooperation from the relief agencies was a critical factor in enabling the two most recently published (2003) cases to emerge. Both Aniya Thomas and Luk Van Wassenhove acknowledge the role played by David Kastrud, Chief of Logistics at the World Food Programme (WFP) and Head of the United Nations Joint Logististics Centre (UNJLC), in initiating the cases and enabling the research to take place. With much front line experience of the challenge of getting disaster relief organisations to work together, David underlined the necessity of developing training materials and had recognised the value of the two IFRC cases.

The resulting cases deal with the UNJLC, set up in complex disasters to coordinate logistics between the different agencies and to augment the agencies’ logistics capabilities. The United Nations Joint Logististics Centre (UNJLC): The Genesis of a Humanitarian Relief Coordination Platform, traces the origins of the UNJLC throughout several man-made and natural disasters in the 1990s, with a special emphasis on the spectacular airlift operations during the Mozambique floods. The United Nations Joint Logististics Centre (UNJLC): The Afghanistan Crisis, discusses the first six months of the UNJLC in the particularly complex Afghanistan crisis (October 2001 – March 2002). A forthcoming case will look at UNJLC’s second year in Afghanistan (April 2002 – March 2003), and a further case, in preparation, will look at the institutionalisation of the UNJLC concept within the United Nations.

Set will allow for an in-depth discussion of the challenges

As a group, the cases not only provide much-needed new teaching material in a hitherto largely unresearched area, but they present a flexible and versatile package for a variety of teaching situations. They allow in-depth discussion of the challenge of coordinating logistics between “competing” organisations, with different charters, in situations of disaster. According to Luk Van Wassenhove, “they lend themselves well, in business education, to either an elective type course, specifically looking at supply chain management in humanitarian disasters, or to integration into a core course on supply chain management”. There, they might be used, early in the course, to surprise and interest students with the non-business supply chain environment or, alternatively, they may be used at the end of a course to look at the contrasting application of already learned supply chain management theory in a non-business context. In the humanitarian relief-training arena, the cases are already being used with organisations and corporations both as an ongoing initiative of Fritz Institute and with the continuing involvement of the author, Luk Van Wassenhove. The UNJLC cases will be used at a forthcoming WFP training programme in Rome, where Luk Van Wassenhove will lead the case discussions. Already, it seems, the cases are making their contribution to disaster relief.

The cases are available from the ECCH, along with teaching notes where applicable, using the following reference numbers:

- 602-047-1 IFRC – Choreographer of Disaster Management: Preparing for Tomorrow’s Disasters
- 602-047-8 Teaching note
- 602-046-1 IFRC – Choreographer of Disaster Management: The Gujarat Earthquake
- 602-046-8 Teaching note

These cases were written by Luk N Van Wassenhove and Raminta Samit, Research Associate, INSEAD, together with Kuldip Kumar and Irma Becerra Fernandez, Florida International University.

- 603-010-1 The United Nations Joint Logistics Centre (UNJLC): The Genesis of a Humanitarian Relief Coordination Platform
- 603-011-1 The United Nations Joint Logistics Centre (UNJLC): The Afghanistan Crisis

These cases were written by Luk N Van Wassenhove and Raminta Samit, Research Associate, INSEAD