

Aid to digestion

Many aid agencies have horror stories of useless consignments of cheese and chocolate being sent to desperate people instead of urgently-needed rice and blankets. But a new computer system could stop such costly mistakes. Daloni Carlisle reports

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Have you heard the one about the generous donor who packed up a cargo planeload of food parcels containing soft cheese portions for Kosovar refugees during the 1999 NATO airstrikes? "Camembert wasn't part of the refugees' normal diet," said a wry Mike Goodhand, head of logistics for the British Red Cross and the man on the ground in Albania who had to deal with the consignment. The food parcels blocked Tirana airport for several days, stinking to high heaven in the summer heat and delaying more useful donations such as blankets, rice and tents.

Every aid organisation has similar tales to tell. Lorry loads of chocolate melting in the African sun while starving people need rice and beans; warehouses full of nothing but tomato puree.

They are not tales of incompetence, Mr Goodhand said, but rather demonstrate the highly complex nature of getting the aid that is needed to the right place at the right time in the middle of a catastrophe. And

with a record 256 million people affected by natural disasters alone last year, the business of logistics is one that aid agencies are keen to get right.

That is where new web-based software developed by one of the world's richest men comes in. Launched this week by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, for the first time it will link everyone in the chain to a single, transparent system.

The system was developed by Lynn Fritz, a San Francisco-based businessman who developed his family's truck delivery business into a multinational empire. When he sold the business in 1997 for \$500m (£320m), it had offices in 120 countries and 11,000 employees.

He has since devoted his energies and cash to bringing commercial expertise and solutions to humanitarian aid.

"Every year people in our offices were impacted by disasters," he said. "Not only were we unable to do business but more importantly we couldn't support our employees. We found repeatedly that we were not able to contact the humanitarian organisations and governments in time to be of assistance."

And the reason for this? While aid agencies can raise money for food and blankets, it is much

more difficult to get cash to pay for operational systems to deliver them efficiently.

As Mr Fritz put it: "The operational side of humanitarian aid is very needful."

It is also very complex. "The skeleton of requirements is the same in aid as in the commercial world, but the dynamics of humanitarian aid are extraordinarily different," he added.

Aid agencies do, after all, work in areas hit by floods, famine, war, earthquakes and the like where normal communications don't work.

"Commercial companies know what they are delivering and to whom. They have developed software packages that will track a lorry or design a delivery route," Mr Goodhand said. "But there is nothing in the commercial world that will cover a delivery route that goes from large cargo plane to small plane to the back of a donkey in Afghanistan."

The web-based system now on trial at the International Red Cross Geneva headquarters was designed with this in mind. As Mr Fritz said: "It doesn't matter whether you're in Iraq or Liberia. All you need is a PC and a satellite phone."

For Mr Goodhand the single

most important benefit is that it will provide real time information in a single source. "This is going to be a real lifeline: for the first time we will have a transparent pipeline," he said.

"It will save us hours by providing a single information source that donors can look at to see what's needed, we can see what's been promised and what's in the pipeline and when it's arriving."

It will also allow aid agencies to track what went where and report that back to their donors.

It will take some time to roll out,

first across regions and then to individual national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies. Eventually it could become a standard tool for all agencies.

"This was developed in consultation with the world's 20 biggest aid agencies and is being made available free," Mr Fritz said.

But will it save lives? "We don't expect it to solve all our problems," Mr Goodhand said. "It's not going to stop people getting hungry or a hurricane from battering Hong Kong.

"But anything that allows us to save time and do things quicker

and stop us having to sift through paperwork means we can spend more time distributing relief supplies to the people who need it."

And on the cheese, he added: "The donor who sent it out would have been able to look at our needs - and see that Camembert was not one of them. If they'd sent it anyway we would have seen it coming and been able to send it back before it hit the tarmac."