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Humanitarian logistics enters the 21st century

IFRC

He is among those few who can fairly stake a claim to being the father of modern day logistics. As "flower power" swept his native San Francisco, Lynn Fritz took over his family documentation business in the city's Battery and Pacific district in 1969 and turned into one of the most effective logistics operations that the world has ever seen.

"The mood of the times may have helped, but I would have done it anyway. I saw that everything we were doing was part of a process and decided to create a one-stop shop," he says.

The result was the creation of a global logistics conglomerate, the Fritz Companies, which went from 40 employees in 1969 to 11,000 staff in 120 countries around the world when it was acquired by UPS two years ago for US\$ 460 million.

During the 1990s, Fritz became increasingly concerned about the rising numbers of natural disasters worldwide. He was particularly troubled by earthquakes in Turkey, cyclones in Bangladesh and landslides in Venezuela and saw the impact this was having on the lives of his employees and families.

Thus was engendered an interest in disaster planning which finally led him to explore more fully the

world of humanitarian relief. In conversations with his business peers he realised that many major businesses do not have disaster plans.

He commissioned research into the operations of relief organizations and paid an extensive visit himself to southern Africa last year to get a close-up look at how the Red Cross in the region was responding to a food crisis that was threatening the lives of 14 million people.

"When you went to the field and saw the heroic resourcefulness of people on the operations side dealing with a real lack of resources and tools it only increased your admiration for what was being achieved. I was very moved by what I saw in Lesotho," says Fritz.

"I was very impressed with the focus, the spirit, the commitment of the humanitarian organizations in the field. I was impressed with the order, method and the dignity in how they approached the beneficiaries. It was beautiful really," he recalls.

So it is that his non-profit organization, Fritz Institute, is turning its attention and considerable resources to strengthening the infrastructure of humanitarian relief organizations by mobilizing

logistics and technical expertise and resources.

As well as taking on the role of director general of the Fritz Institute, he also found the time to co-found the Disaster Resource Network set up at the World Economic Forum held in New York following the tragic events of September 11, 2001 with the aim of encouraging partnerships between the private and the humanitarian sectors particularly in the areas of construction, logistics and engineering.

One major partnership to develop out of that has been between Fritz Institute and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. This results from a conviction that information technology can be adapted to make a significant impact on the effectiveness of humanitarian logistics - the processes and systems involved in mobilizing people, resources, skills and knowledge to help vulnerable people affected by natural disasters and complex emergencies. Procurement, transport, tracking, customs clearance, local transportation, warehousing and last-mile delivery all fall within its remit.

Over the last year, experts from Fritz Institute have spent 3,000 hours interviewing Red Cross and

Red Crescent staff in Geneva and in the field and invested one million dollars in developing a web-based Humanitarian Logistics Software package which goes live this week and will gradually become standard in operations around the world. It will also be made available to other humanitarian organizations.

"There is no doubt that our resources are being stretched to the limit as we see the numbers of people affected by disasters worldwide increasing dramatically year after year. This technology will ease the burden of tracking and delivering emergency supplies and free us to focus more resources on saving lives and providing direct assistance to those most in need," says Abbas Gullet, director of disaster management at the International Federation.

Bernard Chomilier, head of logistics at the Federation, puts the

dilemma facing humanitarian logisticians in the first hours of a disaster bluntly: "You don't know what you need, where you need it or how to get it there, and it is a matter of life and death."

Humanitarian Logistics Software has been designed based on the needs of humanitarian relief organizations during the emergency phase of a disaster. It is customized for the mobilization phase and reporting needs of major disasters. The web-based technology allows up-to-the-minute tracking of food, non-food, gifts-in-kind and financial information about the commodities in the supply chain.

Lynn Fritz's business experience tells him that information technology has had a dramatic impact on supply chains but he recognises that software for relief organizations' supply chains "is uniquely different

from that intended for commercial supply chains. Humanitarian relief is a cyclical and often unpredictable business and that's why we have invested so much time and effort in developing this software."

The partnership between Fritz and the Federation will have a long life as the Institute's Managing Director, Dr. Anisya Thomas, has mapped out a long-term programme to bring academics, corporate experts and professionals from humanitarian organizations together to develop solutions and record key learning.

"We aim over time to create a network of knowledge that contributes to the institutional memory of the humanitarian relief community," she says.