Editor’s note: The recent tsunami disaster in Asia resulted in massive loss of life, economic disruption and human suffering. It has also brought about a massive outpouring of support for relief and recovery from around the world. Along with these expressions of generosity, there is more widespread recognition of the difficulty that relief agencies face in reaching affected populations in this crisis. These challenges underscore the critical importance of collaborative approaches to humanitarian logistics such as the ones highlighted in the interview with Lynn Fritz below and the related story on Humanitarian Logistics Software in this issue of Global Giving Matters.

A dynamic new global partnership is applying the lessons learned from the corporate supply chain revolution to the operations of humanitarian relief organizations and saving time, money and lives in the process.

The work of this alliance offers a promising model for overcoming a formidable array of obstacles to effective delivery of aid to the more than 200 million people each year around the world affected by natural disasters and humanitarian crises.

The prime movers in this partnership are the world’s largest humanitarian organization, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the San Francisco-based Fritz Institute, a nonprofit founded by philanthropist and former global logistics executive, Lynn Fritz (see interview with Fritz also in this issue).

The flagship product of this collaboration, the first-ever Web-based supply chain software, is designed to connect all the steps of the logistics chain, from the launch of an emergency appeal, to procurement, donations, warehousing and distribution. At a time when nonprofit organizations are coming under increased scrutiny by donors, the software also serves to increase transparency by making it easier to track where contributors’ money goes.

Humanitarian Logistics Software (HLS), developed by the Fritz Institute and tailored to the needs of the IFRC, enables real-time matching of the needs of a population affected by a disaster with the supplies that hold the key to survival and recovery. (A demonstration of the HLS software is available on the Fritz Institute website www.fritzinstitute.org.)

Development of the software was enhanced by private sector expertise, gained from Lynn Fritz’s long career in global logistics, as well as from in-kind consultations with a variety of supply chain veterans from the corporate world.

The effectiveness of the supply chain infrastructure is a critical factor in the performance of humanitarian relief organizations, yet this sector has been slow to make much-needed investments in logistics.

Among the reasons identified by industry leaders are funding mechanisms that favor direct relief over infrastructure; fierce competition for scarce donor funds that hampers collaboration; high employee turnover that limits institutional memory; and ineffective leveraging of technology.

HLS addresses some of these barriers by offering the benefits of standardization while being easily customized to meet the specific needs of different users. The proprietary software is being offered free of charge to qualified aid agencies in the hope that it will eventually be adopted widely across the humanitarian relief sector.

Increasing the speed and quality of the relief process

In-depth analysis of some of the largest relief operations undertaken by the IFRC indicates that the speed of the relief process can be increased 20 to 30 percent using HLS. The software was officially adopted by IFRC’s Geneva Secretariat in September 2003 and is eventually expected to become standard for Red Cross and Red Crescent operations around the world.

HLS will also be a central tool used by a network of major African Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies as part of a new initiative announced by the Fritz Institute and IFRC in...
November 2004. The New Partnership for Red Cross, Red Crescent Societies (NEPARC) is the first attempt at a regional collaboration to build local capacity among Red Cross and Red Crescent chapters on the African continent. The initiative will attempt to mobilize a range of new resources to empower these Societies, particularly local companies and multinationals with a presence in Africa.

IFRC operations have been enhanced by the use of HLS in response to Hurricane Jeanne in Haiti, Hurricane Ivan in the Caribbean, the earthquake in Morocco, and with Sudanese refugees, according to Birgitte Stader-Olsen, head of resources mobilization for IFRC. The list of users continues to expand, with its roll-out to all logistics personnel at IFRC headquarters in Geneva, and its field testing in Dubai and Panama (IFRC’s logistics base in the Americas).

While development of HLS has been a major commitment for the Fritz Institute, it represents just one of a number of complementary and integrated strategies for strengthening the capabilities of humanitarian relief organizations. A key aim is to create a "community of practice" sharing knowledge in humanitarian logistics, which is long-overdue. Toward this end, an annual Humanitarian Logistics Conference convenes key players in humanitarian aid and a global network of scholars and research is being assembled to develop and document solutions to common problems.

Another priority is the mobilization of the underused private sector; after several years of bringing in corporate expertise on an ad hoc basis as circumstances required, the Fritz Institute has recently created a more formalized program, "Corporations for Humanity," to channel business support for humanitarian logistics (see interview with Lynn Fritz, also in this issue).

As it seeks to give greater visibility and support to humanitarian logistics, the Fritz Institute is working on multiple levels to establish a broad-based, professional, community that will invest jointly to advance the field. Collaborative efforts such as Humanitarian Logistics Software demonstrate that such an approach is already paying off with measurable dividends.

For more information on Corporations for Humanity, contact: corporationsforhumanity@fritzinstitute.org, or call +1 (415) 538-8302.