

With Lynn Fritz Fritz Institute

Lynn Fritz, former chief executive of the Fritz Cos., is the founder of Fritz Institute, a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization specializing in the logistics of humanitarian relief operations. Fritz was recently appointed to the HELP Commission, established by Congress to evaluate the role of the U.S. in international relief efforts. The Fritz Institute conducted a survey on the humanitarian relief supply chain associated with the December 2004 tsunami that struck South Asia and eastern Africa. The responses from 18 relief organizations found that their relief efforts were hampered by a lack of trained logistics experts.

Q. How can the lessons of the tsunami survey be applied to the relief effort in New Orleans and other Gulf Coast areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina?

A. Two obvious elements inhibited disaster relief in both of these catastrophes. One was the lack of preparedness, and the other was the inability of local and regional resources to respond immediately. Such fundamental preparations as training, processes and procedures, and resources such as warehouses and distribution outlets, technology and infrastructure are critical to disaster relief. These elements were sorely missing in New Orleans and in Banda Aceh in Indonesia. By contrast, they were relatively available in India during the tsunami last December.

Q. Why was that?

A. In India, they know they are in harm's way. They weren't expecting the tsunami, but they get typhoons, they get cyclones and they get earthquakes. Over the years, especially since Gujarat (the January 2001 earthquake), they've built up a relatively good local working capacity and it showed during the first days of the tsunami, when it significantly mitigated the impact of the disaster. Also, in India, since the damage was contained, most of the infrastructure was able to be mobilized for the relief effort. For New Orleans, there didn't seem to be a lot of resources or a very well-defined plan or training and technology or any kind of idea of "here's what's going to happen in that event." I'm not saying every city in the world should be prepared, but in future, we should use the lessons of New Orleans to help prepare cities and areas that are in harm's way, such as southern Florida, San Francisco and Cape Hatteras, as well as Bangladesh, India, Mexico and Japan. Something is going to happen in these places, and there should be some preparation for these events. Preparation is the key, particularly at the local level.

Q. In the wake of Katrina, what would you like to see as the best case at the federal and the local levels?

A. At the local level, in those areas that are prone to disasters, there should be at least rudimentary preparations that should be put together by local government, business — in a big way — and humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross. There should be some third-party expert that can help guide this process and help put it together. There should be a command point, some training and some simple standard technology for logistics and communications that everyone would agree to use as a management tool for such things as purchasing and distribution in the event of a disaster. In Banda Aceh, there was nothing to begin with, so the relief organizations brought in everything. But no one anticipated that in the U.S., where there is plenty of technology, the New York City police and firemen wouldn't have radios that could talk to each other during 9-11. Disasters are foreseeable, so we should be prepared with technology that works.

Q. What role can the federal government play in disaster relief?

A. The government should set federal standards for preparation at the local levels, whether it's through the Federal Emergency Management Agency or some other agency. There should be standards for meeting the needs of the people affected by the disasters, and there should be ways of measuring the preparedness so that someone can determine whether these standards are being met. Setting the standards is hard. It starts with a plan, and the output should be measured. The standards should cover things such as how soon the communications apparatus should be set up and how long before all the people in the relief network can be contacted and mobilized. I would like to see a clear chain of command from the local level on up to a central body, such as FEMA, which would monitor and measure preparedness in the same way the Federal Aviation Administration sets and monitors standards for local airports.

Q. What role should the private sector play in disaster relief?

A. I believe the private sector can be an important partner in disaster relief. It's an abiding interest of the private sector to get involved in these efforts. They have the resources, they have the technology, and they have the people. Because the private sector must have business continuity plans to protect their businesses, they can be an important source of ideas and innovation in preparedness and restoring normalcy after a disaster.

— Peter T. Leach



