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Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief Operations: Logistics Perspective

In the contemporary world, emergency situations when an immediate and effective response is needed are common, and many of them require highly professional humanitarian aid and disaster relief operations. However, such interventions cannot occur without proper logistics, which is a complex dimension of relief operations. Being aware of its specifics allows reaching the most effective results and saving human lives; therefore, it is critically important to review the concept of humanitarian logistics, its determinants, characteristics, phases, relationships involved, and possible challenges.

According to its definition, humanitarian logistics is the process of planning, implementing, and controlling the efficient and cost-effective flow and storage of goods and materials, as well as related information, from the origin to the point of consumption for the purpose of relieving the suffering of vulnerable people (Thomas & Kopczak 2). Humanitarian logistics is the major driving force behind successful disaster relief for several reasons. First of all, as it is precisely explained by Thomas and Kopczak (2), it defines the speed and effectiveness of response for major humanitarian programs. Secondly, the effectiveness of logistics also determines the costs of relief efforts, because transportation often is the most

expensive part. Thirdly, logistics accumulate various data related to disasters, which can be further utilized for post-event learning and analysis.

All in all, humanitarian supply management and logistics is a complicated process consisting of and being influenced by a wide range of determinants. According to the Pan American Health Organization (13), there are four major aspects of supply chain logistics: procurement, transport, storage, and distribution. The procurement process aims at ensuring that the organizations involved in relief management have all resources needed to face challenges efficiently and fulfill all needs. Using a straightforward meaning, the category of transport can be defined as the means whereby supplies reach places where they are needed (Pan American Health Organization 14). Next, the objectives of storage are focused on protecting emergency supplies in an organized and systematic manner until they can be delivered to their recipients (Pan American Health Organization 14). Finally, the distribution appears as a major aspect, establishing the backbone of the logistics chain in relief operations, as it is aimed at delivering aid to people affected by disasters. Considering the above-mentioned determinants, it is worth emphasizing that they are closely related and should work in combination in order to achieve the most effective results.

Moreover, the above-mentioned determinants are linked to specific features of humanitarian logistics. Kovacs and Spens define a range of humanitarian logistics characteristics, which includes the stages of setup, purpose, basic elements, time constraints, suppliers, and others. For instance, the terms of basic elements, unpredictable demand, uncertain situations in emergencies, activities on a large scale, and a variety of supplies and suppliers (Kovacs & Spens). Being aware of these characteristics allows for the changing of humanitarian aid and disaster relief operations in order to avoid and overcome possible pitfalls.

Next, the humanitarian logistics process envisages a range of strategic, tactical, and operational tasks and solutions necessary to be pondered in order to ensure effective management. For instance, among the strategic tasks are defining a mission, objectives, and assignments, while the tactical tasks and solutions include demand and team planning. The operational tasks refer, for instance, to the evaluation of local and regional capacity and resources (Stratieva 94).

Along with tasks, adherence to specific steps of humanitarian logistics allows reaching well-organized operations, reducing the chances of failures. According to Cozzolino (8), the phases of humanitarian logistics are mitigation, preparation, response, and reconstruction, which together create the disaster management cycle. The mitigation phase refers to laws and mechanisms that reduce social vulnerability, while preparation refers to a range of operations occurring during the period before a disaster strikes (Cozzolino 9). The response phase includes operations that take place immediately after the disaster occurs, and the reconstruction phase refers to different operations in the aftermath of a disaster (Cozzolino 10). In their work, Moeiny and Mokhlesi, in turn, expand the above-mentioned list, providing nine major steps in the relief supply chain. These are planning and preparedness, assessment, resource mobilization, procurement and donations, transport and execution, tracking and tracing, stock asset management, extended point of delivery, and relief to beneficiaries (Moeiny & Mokhlesi 14).

In addition, despite the complexity of the processes and steps existing within humanitarian logistics, this sphere also has a multi-dimensional relationship between various actors participating in operations. Specifically, Larson provides the actor-based typology of relationships that consist of four major dimensions. These are the humanitarian relationship between NGOs, the humanitarian relationship between NGOs and the UN, the humanitarian

relationship between NGOs and commercial enterprises, and the humanitarian relationship between NGOs and military units.

Along with the knowledge of the characteristics, determinants, phases, and relationship of the humanitarian supply chain, it is also critical to be aware of possible challenges that may arise on the road to effective humanitarian logistics. In this context, the first obstacle may refer to the inadequacy in planning, such as a failure to pre-plan stocks or a lack of inter-organizational collaboration with information systems (Rokani). Among other significant challenges can be the lack of strategic perspective and lack of coordination functions (Rokani). Being acquainted with these issues creates the image of how an effective supply chain management should be.

As a result, it is clear that the logistics of humanitarian aid and disaster relief operations is a highly important but also complex field of study. The awareness of such aspects as determinants, characteristics, stages, goals, relationship, and challenges of humanitarian logistics allows manipulating them for the sake of an operations' effectiveness and to reach as many positive outcomes as possible.

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