
Editorial

Karen M. Spens and Gyöngyi Kovács

Supply Chain Management and Corporate Geography,
Department of Marketing,
HANKEN (Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration)
P.O. Box 479, 00101 Helsinki, Finland
E-mail: spens@hanken.fi
E-mail: kovacs@hanken.fi

Biographical notes: Karen Spens is Professor of Supply Chain Management and Corporate Geography at the Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration (Hanken) in Helsinki, Finland. She earned her PhD from Hanken in 2001, and has since published articles in logistics journals such as *International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management* and the *International Journal of Logistics Management*. She has also edited several special issues for different journals. Her research interests include humanitarian logistics, healthcare related research and methodological issues in logistics and supply chain management. She can be contacted at karen.spens@hanken.fi.

Gyöngyi Kovács is an Assistant Professor in Supply Chain Management and Corporate Geography at the Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration (Hanken) in Helsinki, Finland, where she earned her PhD. She is the Coordinator of the HUMLOG Group, a research network in humanitarian logistics. Her other research interests include sustainable supply chain management and supply chain collaboration. Her publications have appeared in the *International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management* and the *Journal of Transport Geography*. She is currently the European co-editor of the *International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management*. She can be contacted at kovacs@hanken.fi.

1 Introduction

Delivering humanitarian aid involves many different actors, including beneficiaries, donors, aid agencies, NGOs, logistics service providers, governments as well as military forces. The coordination and design of structures, processes and services is particularly challenging due to the conditions in which humanitarian aid is delivered, which can be described as unpredictable, turbulent, and requiring flexibility. The international humanitarian community has repeatedly called for an increase in the coordination in delivery of aid. Therefore, there is need for more knowledge concerning the coordination between actors, from an intra-organisational as well as from an inter-organisational perspective. This special issue focuses on the coordination of logistical, technological and financial services of different actors working in humanitarian aid. The following topics were suggested for the special issue:

- inter-organisational coordination
- supply chain integration
- logistics services and technologies
- third and fourth party logistics
- logistics knowledge management
- financial flows and services
- integrating financial and material flows
- healthcare services

Interestingly, the final four articles that have been accepted to this special issue after a double-blind review process approach the issue of coordination from very different angles. The complexity of global humanitarian organisations speaks for investigating their internal coordination mechanisms, while the variety of organisations that are active in the humanitarian sector stresses the need of coordinating efforts across humanitarian organisations and their partners, internationally, and at the site of a disaster. What is more, supply chain management literature looks at coordination from the perspective of material flows. Therefore this special issue starts with an article that looks at internal coordination efforts of a humanitarian organisation, before expanding on the issue of performance management tools to foster coordination also across organisations. The special issue closes with the evaluation of the lean supply chain concept of value chain analysis for humanitarian supply chains. In doing so, the articles of this special issue highlight not only different coordination mechanisms – notably stressing process and performance management tools – but also provide an overarching view over the various application areas of the concept of coordination in humanitarian aid.

2 The articles selected for this special issue

Van der Laan, de Brito, van Fenema and Vermaesen in their article on ‘Managing information cycles for intra-organisational coordination of humanitarian logistics’ set out to identify the major issues regarding intra-organisational coordination of logistics activities in the humanitarian context, focusing on information and knowledge management aspects. The authors develop a model that combines information cycles with activity cycles and use this model to analyse the coordination practices at the Dutch filial of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF-Holland). The focus of their analysis is on enhancing coordination capabilities in the area of logistics, as its effectiveness critically depends on the availability and quality of logistics support information, but data is often scarce and ICT support to remote areas is limited. Moreover, humanitarian operations typically take place in unstable and risky environments, where infrastructure is poor, while staff turnover is high. Challenges caused by these constraints call for conceptual insight into the intra-organisational coordination process in humanitarian aid. The article thus closes not only with guidelines for MSF Holland but also implications for research.

Blecken, Hellingrath, Dangelmaier and Schulz in their article ‘A humanitarian supply chain process reference model’ investigate the variety of activities comprised by

humanitarian operations. These activities differ in temporal and spatial scope, as well as objectives, target population and with respect to the delivered goods and services. Despite a notable variety of agendas of the humanitarian actors, the requirements on the supply chain and supporting logistics activities remain similar to a large extent. This motivates the development of a suitably generic reference model for supply chain processes in the context of humanitarian operations. Reference models have been used in commercial environments for a range of purposes, such as analysis of structural, functional, and behavioural properties of supply chains. In the development of their model, a top-down approach is followed, in which modular process elements are developed sequentially and relevant performance measures are identified. Their process reference model aims to support humanitarian organisations when designing appropriately adapted supply chain processes to support their operations, visualising their processes and thus, measuring their performance. The visualisation of internal processes should also contribute to an improvement of communication across humanitarian organisations, and thus, the coordination of their relief efforts.

Banomyong, Beresford and Pettit in their article 'Logistics relief response model: the case of Thailand's tsunami affected area' evaluate the coordination efforts of different humanitarian as well as governmental actors in the Asian tsunami emergency of 2004 in Thailand. What happened in 2004 clearly showed that Thailand lacked an emergency response plan. This article therefore proposes a relief logistics model that suggests an alternative response mechanism to those which are currently in place. It starts with a closer examination of the circumstances surrounding the Asian tsunami emergency of 2004. The tsunami waves that hit Thailand and the chaos that followed highlighted the very low level of preparedness on the part of the Thai authorities to deal with such an event. This has led the Thai Government to concentrate on preparation for relief operation activities in order to be better prepared if a similar event were to occur. The proposed logistics response model is based within a 72 hours time frame should a tsunami hit Thailand again. This model clearly indicates the jurisdiction and job description of each agency involved in the relief operations. It is shown that horizontal and vertical linkages between departments represent the vital parts of successful overall emergency response. Importantly the authors point out that the planning framework of the model proposed in the paper will need to be disseminated to all volunteer organisations. It is not uncommon for volunteer organisations to become a hindrance to the management of integrated relief operations; they need to be made aware of the framework and its operating procedure.

Pettit and Taylor present a paper called 'A consideration of the relevance of LEAN supply chain concepts for humanitarian aid provision'. The paper addresses the notional applicability of lean logistics techniques such as value chain analysis (VCA) to the requirements of the humanitarian aid supply chain. The purpose of the paper is to discuss the theoretical basis for the use of VCA and how it could be used to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian aid supply chains. The key components of VCA are considered separately and the paper concludes that there is significant scope for the application of such techniques which ultimately could have a fundamental bearing on how humanitarian aid supply chains are implemented.

We, the editors, hope that you find the articles presented in this special issue interesting and inspiring. Through providing this special issue, we also hope that even more researchers find this new and exciting area and want to contribute to furthering the

field. The articles in this special issue outline a number of avenues for further research. Thus, in the following, we will take up some of these avenues in their turn, and outline some suggestions for further research to look at.

3 Conclusions and further research

Coordination is arguably the most emphasised topic of humanitarian aid. As different from commercial organisations, the humanitarian sector is not inhibited but encouraged to coordinate their efforts in delivering aid. Therefore a number of new coordination mechanisms have been developed recently for this particular application area. Mostly these mechanisms focus on information and communication technology, but as of late, the emphasis has shifted towards incentives for coordination, measuring the effects of coordinating relief efforts on the performance of individual organisations, and the performance of a relief effort en large, and on the establishment of joint logistics management. The focus on humanitarian logistics is particularly crucial as the costs of humanitarian aid consist of 80% and more of logistical efforts (cf. van Wassenhove, 2006). Yet interestingly, while research on disaster management, the accountability of aid, as well as aid effectiveness has been prominent, humanitarian logistics as the single most important contributor to aid effectiveness has insofar received less attention from academia. Therefore special issues in this field are particularly important, and to the point.

This special issue 'Coordination of Service Providers in Humanitarian Aid' for the *International Journal of Services Technology and Management* is particularly interesting, as it shows a number of different application areas of the concept of coordination in the humanitarian sector, ranging from internal coordination in international humanitarian organisations, to coordinating relief efforts across the complex array of organisations present at a disaster, and to coordinating humanitarian supply chains. It is to date the coordination across humanitarian organisations that has been the prime focus of practice and research alike. Coordination in the humanitarian supply chain is a less explored matter, which is surprising given the abundance of supply chain integration and supply chain collaboration literature when it comes to commercial supply chains. Applying these concepts in the humanitarian supply chain could be an interesting avenue for further research.

Another dominant aspect of discussing coordination in humanitarian aid is the focus on the development of formal mechanisms of coordination. While formal mechanisms such as common ICT systems certainly have their place, further research is needed into the informal aspects of coordinating relief efforts. Humanitarian logisticians have a number of platforms where they can meet internationally as well as on the site of a disaster. Such communities of practice have a lot to offer to transfer knowledge about humanitarian logistics, and indeed, to function as informal coordination mechanisms of relief efforts. Communities of practice research in this context is the more interesting as the organisations in question are competitors at the same time as they are encouraged to coordinate their efforts. Thus, the humanitarian sector is exposed to forces of cooperation and competition, or cooptation, at the same time. Research could contribute here to the understanding of how to foster the coordination of humanitarian aid in spite of the existence of competitive forces.

Coming back to the issue of inter-organisational coordination of humanitarian aid, much is still left to do to understand in the coordination of efforts across different types of organisations. Two of these types are of particular interest to research as well as practice. Firstly, the forms of public-private partnerships in humanitarian aid, including questions of philanthropy and corporate social responsibility on one hand, and the non-violation of humanitarian principles on the other. Here the question is not only of material suppliers as aid donors, but also of the partnerships between third party logistics providers and humanitarian organisations. The second area of interest is that of civil-military coordination, i.e. the interface between humanitarian organisations and military actors that meet in e.g. complex emergencies. This area is more important as the number and extent of emergencies with a war element is continuously on the rise, and even peace-keeping alongside disaster relief is poorly understood.

In summary, this special issue can be seen as a start in assembling literature around the topic of coordination in humanitarian aid. Yet more is still to be done, and we would like to call for more research attention to all of the issues outlined above. Thus we hope that this special issue will spark more research interest in this field.

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References

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Notes

Both editors are also founding members of the HUMLOG Group, the aim of which is "To research the area of humanitarian logistics in disaster preparedness, response and recovery with the intention of influencing future activities in a way that will provide measurable benefit to persons requiring assistance".