





Sabine Friederike Schulz

# Disaster Relief Logistics

Benefits of and Impediments to Cooperation  
between Humanitarian Organizations

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*Sabine Friederike Schulz* has completed her PhD at the Logistics Department of the University of Technology in Berlin. Her research focuses on the area of inter-organizational cooperation and performance measurement within disaster relief logistics. She holds a graduate degree in Business Administration from the University of Passau and has been working for over two years as a Consultant for McKinsey & Company, Inc.

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## Abstract

A steadily growing number of natural disasters is calling for a more efficient and effective handling of disaster relief operations. Since logistics accounts for up to 80% of the total relief expenditures of humanitarian organizations, it represents one of the main levers to achieve improvements in terms of cost, time and quality. In particular, investments in supply chain infrastructure and other preparations in the forefront of disasters are still limited, although they promise the highest return on investment. A general lack of coordination and cooperation between humanitarian organizations is among the issues criticized most. But why should and how could humanitarian organizations cooperate with each other in the area of disaster relief logistics?

This thesis investigates what synergies and potential types of benefit a horizontal cooperation between humanitarian organizations could produce, and what impediments to their realization exist. The focus is placed on supply chain infrastructure and supply chain consolidation up to the point of entry, e.g. the first airport or seaport in a disaster-affected area. The investigation is based on a selected cooperation format which follows a service provider approach. In this approach, some humanitarian organizations act as logistics service providers for others, so that volumes can be consolidated and economies of scale realized. Through a combination of deductive and abductive research, this thesis draws on the results of research contributions on horizontal logistics cooperation in the private sector, as well as on insights arising from New Institutional and Production Cost Economics.

Through a cross-case analysis of three logistics cooperation initiatives recently set up by major disaster relief and donor organizations, it can be concluded that the same potential synergies exist in the humanitarian as in the private sector, but that not all of the potential benefits have yet been realized. Humanitarian organizations focus less on cost aspects than on lead-time and quality improvements. Smaller organizations, in particular, can benefit from the services becoming accessible through a cooperative approach. The thesis identifies four main impediments that hamper cooperation willingness between organizations: the perception of logistics as one of the organization's own core competences; cultural differences and mutual mistrust; a lack of transparency as regards the potential and existing benefits; and inadequate relief capacities. Facilitators to address these impediments are developed. In addition, the thesis discusses model adaptations that address identified weaknesses in the selected service provider model. In particular, the replacement of humanitarian service providers by commercial enterprises seems a developable variation, and offers a promising area for future research. Implementation guidelines highlight the main

tasks to be undertaken by donors, humanitarian organizations, commercial service providers and the media to promote and foster horizontal logistics cooperation in the future.

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