Some thirty years ago, Bechtel and Jayaram (1997) offered a lexicon of over 50 different definitions of Supply Chain Management (SCM) the existence of which, in itself, provides a useful pointer to both the breadth and depth of the field. The situation has improved over the intervening years, but there remains a spirited debate over the relationship between SCM and logistics - notwithstanding the valiant efforts to achieve a greater unity of understanding through, for example, the work of Paul Larson and his co-researchers (Larson and Halldórsson, 2004; Larson et al., 2007). Although this might be seen by some to reflect a relatively trivial academic debate, such labels are important. Thus, if one sees the practice of logistics as being principally focussed on the movement and storage of material – the ‘trucks and sheds’ perspective – then the duties of those who manage and operate in this field are relatively limited.

However, even a cursory review of the most frequently quoted definition of humanitarian logistics:

*The process of planning, implementing and controlling the efficient, cost-effective flow and storage of goods and materials as well as related information, from the point of origin to the point of consumption for the purpose of meeting the end beneficiary’s requirements* (Thomas and Mizushima, 2005, p. 60).

clearly demonstrates that, in this context, the challenge is significantly broader and deeper than just that related to the movement of materiel. Indeed, to many observers, the functions described by Thomas and Mizushima of procurement, transport to the disaster area, warehousing, ‘last mile’ distribution, and all of the associated information management functions are synonymous with those undertaken by a commercial supply network (or chain) manager – with all of the concomitant implications for the relative importance and influence of the position within the organisation as a whole.

A further important consideration when considering the scope of the field is to reflect on the extent to which this aspect of the preparation for, and response to, disasters/complex emergencies represents a distinct field of study or whether it is better viewed as an extension of the spectrum of generic ways in which the supply and demand sides of the network can be kept in balance. Certainly, when compared to its commercial (‘for profit’) counterpart, the challenges of managing the disaster response exhibit specific features. The most obvious example is that the funding normally comes from donors rather than the final consumer of the goods – leading to the potential for two sets of ‘customers’ with potentially differing aims and objectives. Similarly, the price of failure of the supply network can be counted in unnecessary loss of life and/or increased suffering rather than simply reduced profits.
However, by positioning the field as, to use the taxonomy of Gattorna (2010), the management of ‘fully flexible’ supply networks, then the case for bi-directional learning becomes clearer. In essence, whether in industry or in the disaster/relief sector, the challenge remains the same in terms of understanding and achieving the optimum disposition of resources (or, in the opposite sense, the level of risk that is acceptable) across a number of dimensions such as Cost, Responsiveness, Security, Sustainability, Resilience, and Innovation (Melnyk, et al., 2010).

Thus, those working in the disaster/emergency response arena should, arguably, be making positive efforts to adapt, develop and learn from those companies which are operating in the increasingly turbulent business environment of the 21st Century (Christopher and Holweg, 2011). By the same token, those businesses which are inhabiting this space would do well to understand how those operating in the extremely challenging pre- and post-disaster arena actually achieve such superb results – not least through the effectiveness, flexibility and dedication of their staff. Indeed, it is the role of publications such as JHLSCM to help to bridge this gap between the theoretician and the practitioner, and between the profit and non-profit sectors – with the forthcoming special edition on training and education being a excellent example of this process in action.

In any event, the articles in this edition of the Journal clearly underline the depth and breadth of humanitarian logistics/supply network management, and the associated importance of the field to the agencies and organisations working to meet both the disaster and development challenges. The first of these is the “Meta-Analysis of Humanitarian Logistics Research” by Kunz and Reiner. This presents a robust examination of the literature across 68 journals and covering 174 papers. In doing so, their analysis is unique in that it categorises the literature by virtue of its relative usage across a number of situational factors. This clearly highlights the areas in which prior research has been focussed and, perhaps more importantly, the areas where additional research would appear to be warranted. Not least, for example, is the observation that over 85% of the papers focus on rapid onset disaster relief as distinct from the challenges of providing support to continuous aid programmes. Given the markedly higher impact of the slow onset scenario – as measured by the number of people affected - it is suggested that this aspect of the role of the humanitarian/supply network manager is ripe for further attention.

The next article by Jensen considers the application of a more classic approach, that of the use of fourth party logistics (4PL), to the humanitarian context. The author reviews the ways in which “Humanitarian Cluster Leads” might derive “Lessons from 4PLs” by means of a qualitative interview study that researches the co-ordination mechanisms employed by the Logistics Cluster. The 4PL concept is both applied and modified for the humanitarian context, where the role of the Logistics Cluster is analysed and compared with its commercial counterpart, and from which a number of valuable lessons can be drawn.
Ibegbunam and McGill investigate the management of HIV/AIDS health commodities in Nigeria. Their article “Health Commodities Management System: Priorities and Challenges” analyses this challenge not only from the perspective of coordination and integration, but also in terms of capacity building, infrastructure development and the overall sustainability of the system. This very rich qualitative case description offers a number of important managerial implications both for those working in this field and more generally.

Although, arguably, some distance from the pure humanitarian domain, Sohrabpour, Hellström and Jahre evaluate packaging systems for developing countries in their article “Packaging in Developing Countries – Identifying Supply Chain Needs”. This provides though a very useful and thorough analysis of problems that may occur in the wake of decisions related to primary and secondary packaging, with a particular focus on the secondary packaging that contains aseptic cartons, such as is used for the transport of milk in many countries. Particular attention is paid to the impact of the physical conditions in many developing countries such as, for example, poor road qualities and old trucks, on the packaging requirements. As the authors convincingly argue, such an analysis has clear potential for improving the standard of secondary packaging for items of relief goods.

In the final part of this edition, the Journal continues its series of book reviews with contributions from George Fenton who is both the Associate Supply Chain Director, Humanitarian and Emergency Affairs for World Vision International and also the Chairman of the Humanitarian Logistic Association, and from Nezih Altay from DePaul University who is one of the Journal’s North American editors. These two highly respected commentators – coming from a practitioner and an academic perspective – consider the anthology Relief Supply Chain Management for Disasters. Whilst agreeing that this volume is more geared towards an academic audience and would benefit from additional case studies and discussion of contemporary topics, they both applaud the scholarship within the book and its overall contribution to the field.

References:


Gattorna, J. (2010), Dynamic Supply Chains (2nd Ed), Pearson Education Ltd, Harlow, UK.

