IN TIME: In order to develop the field in India, the expertise and experience of the private sector should be drawn on. A rescue mission over the Alaknanda.

The Uttarakhand floods exposed that logistics, key to reaching humanitarian relief speedily to victims, is a much neglected aspect of disaster management in India

Floods and landslides in Uttarakhand have once again challenged the country’s disaster management architecture. In the months to come, if we are to improve our disaster response, it is important that government agencies pay greater attention to a largely neglected sphere in disaster management — humanitarian logistics and supply chain management.

Disaster specialists acknowledge that logistics constitutes 80 per cent of disaster effort. It is a critical support function, which impacts the extent and quality of the outreach of relief. This is especially true in the hilly terrain of Uttarakhand. We have repeatedly seen that the challenges of disaster response are amplified when a region lacks infrastructure — roads, schools, health-care systems, storage facilities, electricity and so on. From the perspective of the survivors in Uttarakhand, four major functions are significant in the next few weeks:

1. setting up of quality protective relief camps with food, water, sanitation
2. provision of health-care facilities including psycho-social care
3. credible damage assessment including enumeration of survivors, the dead and the missing
4. clear communication from the government about what people should expect as the next level of help and assistance.

Is it safe to resettle in their village or town? When can they return? What kind of support can they expect? How would aid and relief be disbursed? On what terms? The government would need to take several decisions quickly.

Partnerships

Dr. Anisya Thomas Fritz, a co-founder of Fritz Institute in California, rightly argues that the speed of humanitarian aid is generally dependent on the ability to procure, transport and receive supplies. This is a function of logistics — a field that is reasonably well evolved in the commercial realm but remains weak and unexplored in the humanitarian sector in India.
Several critical decisions are involved. Judging where to locate relief camps and warehouses, sourcing relief items, at what cost, in what quantities, with what kind of packaging, and what one is to do to minimise pilferage and wastage. It would be of immense value, if supply chain specialists from the private sector could step in and assist the affected State administration with expertise. Many industries prefer to intervene directly through their own personnel rather than merely provide donations. A good professional team of supply chain experts, cognizant of the challenges on the ground could work with the State’s officials and help put together a system which will adapt to the context.

**Warehousing and relief camps**

Logistic companies can, for example, be invited to set up quality, temporary warehouses. This would help avoid the wastage that occurs when grain and material is dumped in poorly constructed godowns or merely stocked under a tarpaulin cover. Similarly, forms of expertise that exist in the country like maintaining computerised records, inventory management systems and establishing distribution networks need to be mobilised. After the Kosi floods, many relief camps had poorly constructed tents on uneven ground or *shamiyanas* that were no barrier against inclement weather. In fact, relief camps can be made more safe if sturdy material like a warehouse and partitions that give pregnant and lactating mothers privacy are used. If insulated well, they may help people through the winter in the present situation of Uttarakhand, since the government is unlikely to complete reconstruction in the next few months. Of course, the location of each of these will have to be approved by geologists as being safe sites.

**International practices**

The complexities of managing supply chains in humanitarian settings are many especially because no two disaster contexts are identical. It is difficult to plan for all supplies, their quantity and the location where they are to be transported. Besides, procurement is also affected by demand and pricing after a natural catastrophe.

Experience from all disasters suggests that in addition to storage, appropriate packaging for distribution up to the last mile is another level of challenge, especially in hilly terrain. Next, systematic transportation and distribution is possible if relief camps are mapped and there is a good flow of information. If information is scattered at various levels, the supply chain will remain weak. After a disaster, a flood of relief supplies without direction typically proves to be a serious problem. Working towards increased coordination should be a continuous effort although a fair degree of chaos is to be expected immediately after any disaster. Clearly, various components of logistics need to be looked into simultaneously.

Established international organisations and humanitarian agencies such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, UNICEF, the World Food Programme, Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Oxfam, with a mandate to respond to disasters, recognise the significance of logistics and have well-articulated supply chain management systems. Knowledge and information is compiled and made readily available through tools such as the LogCluster website, Logistics Operational Guide (LOG) and software solutions like Helios.

**Using IT**

Information Technology in the modern corporate sector provides critical information to the management influencing its decision-making process. On the other hand, the humanitarian world has only recently witnessed IT initiatives on a large scale for better management of relief logistics. A Geographic Information System (GIS) has emerged as a very important tool for effective planning and communication, making spatial information available to all users. Internet-based GIS offers a huge potential to improve the way disaster response is organised in Uttarakhand.

In order to develop the field of humanitarian logistics in India, the expertise and experience of the private sector should be drawn on, creating synergies between the government and civil society organisations — each adapting and innovating approaches and frameworks of commercial supply chain management. It would facilitate better quality and the reach of humanitarian response and ensure that the expertise and goodwill that exists within the country is brought to the service of those affected by disasters.

To use the clichéd definition — humanitarian logistics is about getting the right assistance to the right place at the right time at the right cost. Although challenging and difficult, it is never too late to start.

With the rising number of disasters, the significance of comprehending the “uncertainties” involved in humanitarian logistics and developing a robust system for crisis situations can go a long way in saving lives and property.

*(Janki Andharia is professor at the Jamsetji Tata Centre for Disaster Management, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. The views expressed are personal.)*

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