Towards an agile supply chain: lessons learned from humanitarians [*]

Aurélie CHARLES [a], Matthieu LAURAS [b],
Luk N. VAN WASSENHOVE [c]

[a] *EMAC CGI / INSEAD, Albi*

[b] *EMAC CGI, Albi*

[c] *INSEAD, Fontainebleau*

Abstract

Uncertainty is faced everyday by humanitarians. Indeed, more than 210 million people were affected by natural disasters in 2007, and that's without taking into account conflicts and other humanitarian disasters. Humanitarian organizations often have to quickly implement complex supply chains under high levels of uncertainties regarding demand, supply as well as environment, thus becoming specialists at being agile. In this area, humanitarian logisticians could therefore teach a lot to their private counterparts. It is this best practice transfer, that is the purpose of this study. Using a litterature review, we first clarify what is an agile supply chain, and how a high agility capability can be achieved. Then, through an analysis of the differences between commercial and humanitarian supply chains, we assess where the cross-learning potential in term of agility is relevant, and make explicit the best practices that humanitarians implemented in order to develop their supply chain agility. Agility metrics, coming with an assessment methodology relevant for both supply chains are finally defined. The results support our view that, even if humanitarians can and have to learn a lot from the private sector's expertise, the reverse is true also.

Key words: Supply chain management, Agility, Humanitarian Supply Chains

1   Introduction

Cross-learning opportunities between private sector and humanitarians have been listed by many authors. See Van Wassenhove [1]: "while humanitarians can learn a lot from the private sector in terms of designing standard tools and techniques (eg inventory control or warehousing), the private sector can surely learn from the humanitarians in terms of agility and adaptability in response to a quickly changing situation." Oloruntoba and Gray also looked at cross-learning opportunities [10]: "international humanitarian supply chains are clearly unpredictable, turbulent, and requiring flexibility, and therefore insights are to be gained from assessing their potential as agile supply chains." Nowadays, disaster relief is becoming a testing ground for many a researcher in logistics. More and more, they propose ways to implement the tools they designed for the private sector in the humanitarian area. Yet, to date, no one worked the other way around, making explicit the best practices that humanitarians could teach to the private sector and proposing ways to implement such best practice transfers.

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[*] This paper was not presented at any other revue. Corresponding author A. Charles. Tel. +33 6 64 52 58 06. Fax +33 5 63 49 31 83. *Email addresses:* aurelie.charles@enstimac.fr (Aurelie Charles), lauras@enstimac.fr (Matthieu Lauras), luk.van-wassenhove@insead.edu (Luk N. Van Wassenhove).