Understanding host government impact on humanitarian logistics: Effects of interests and dependency in complex emergencies

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Background and objective
“Government” is by far the most mentioned word in humanitarian logistics research (Kunz and Reiner, 2012). Although host government (HG) influence on the delivery performance of international humanitarian organizations (IHOs) assisting victims of major disasters is widely noted, how and under what circumstances they exert this influence is not well understood.

Developing this understanding is all the more urgent in complex emergencies as they constitute the majority of disasters in the world (Albala-Bertrand, 2000) and lead to significantly more fatalities than natural disasters. The World Health Organisation defines a complex emergency as a “situation with complex social, political and economic origins which involves the breakdown of state structures, the disputed legitimacy of host authorities, the abuse of human rights and possibly armed conflict, that creates humanitarian needs”.

This research seeks explanations for the heterogeneous behaviour of HGs towards IHOs in complex emergency settings and to establish what implications their behaviour subsequently has for IHOs’ delivery performance.

A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY APPROACH

- In-depth multiple case study of 6 countries undergoing complex emergencies of varying intensity, duration, and types.
- Complex emergency types include: civil war, post-war, (post-)insurgency, and political-economic crisis.
- All countries drawn from a major medical IHO with a presence of at least 10 years in each country. Most data collected from the IHO.

RESEARCH PROCESS

- Iterative research process starting research design, interview data collection, several rounds of analysis in which more data sources and existing theory were incorporated to refine insights (see figure directly below).

MAIN FINDINGS

Host government stances and determinants of behavior

- Results show that HGs adopt one of four pre-dominant stances in regulating/controlling IHO logistics activities (see figure directly below).
- The adopted stances depend on the level of tension in interests between a HG and an IHO; the regulatory and enforcement capabilities of the HG; and HG dependency on external assistance in general.
- As one country demonstrates, regulation and enforcement capabilities are not necessarily dependent on the economic state of a HG!
- Whereas tension in interests has long been assumed to be political, results suggest a growing trend towards genuine reform where some governments are doing more about the problem of counterfeit medicines brought into their territory for instance.
- In the presence of high dependency and low regulation and enforcement capabilities, tension in interests can be latent making a HG non-restrictive but not necessarily supportive.
- Surprisingly, corruption – another often cited problem – was not found to be a widespread problem/issue.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS

- HG behavior in relation to humanitarian logistics is systematic and predictable. The stark contrasts in HG stances imply that IHOs need to adopt various approaches in different contexts to enhance their delivery performance outcomes.
- All things being equal, practitioners can: prioritize efficiency when HGs are non-restrictive; form alliances to reduce uncertainty and minimize desperation that can lead to bribery when dealing with different HGs; base logistics decisions on available options while lobbying for better conditions when HGs are partially compromising; prioritize partnership with and capacity building of local NGOs early on to enhance performance when working on uncompromising HG soil.