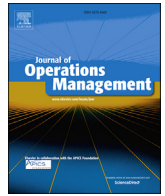




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Host government impact on the logistics performance of international humanitarian organisations

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ABSTRACT

Host governments severely impact international relief operations. An openness to assistance can lead to the timely delivery of aid whereas a reluctance to receive assistance can have devastating consequences. With lives at stake and no time to lose in humanitarian crises, understanding the host government's impact on the logistics performance of international humanitarian organisations (IHOs) is crucial. In this paper, we present an in-depth multiple-case study that explores this aspect. Results show that host government actions are explained by their dependency on IHOs and the levels of tensions between their interests (i.e., conflicting strategic goals). In addition, a host government's regulatory and enforcement capabilities are important for ensuring that they can safeguard their interests. We derive four stances that host governments can adopt in regulating logistics-related activities: non-restrictive, opportunistic, selectively accommodating and uncompromising. Each of these has different implications for the logistics performance of IHOs.

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1. Introduction

Host governments are political actors with a major impact on the inventory management and transport activities of international humanitarian organisations (IHOs) (Kovacs and Spens, 2008; Long and Wood, 1995; Tomasini and Van Wassenhove, 2008; Menkhaus, 2010). In fact, “government” is by far the most frequently mentioned topic in humanitarian logistics research (Kunz and Reiner, 2012). While some host governments facilitate good performance by declaring a state of emergency and relaxing regulations, others impose barriers that impede performance (Long and Wood, 1995; McLachlin et al., 2009; Menkhaus, 2010; Pettit and Beresford, 2005; Toole and Waldman, 1997). Understanding why host governments display such heterogeneity in dealing with IHOs is crucial for enhancing delivery performance in humanitarian operations.

This research seeks to understand the impact of host governments on humanitarian logistics in complex emergencies. The World Health Organisation (WHO) 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”. Complex emergencies constitute the majority of disasters worldwide and are increasingly the backdrop against which major natural disasters occur. They are characterised by large-scale multi-faceted humanitarian needs that are worsened by major security issues, population displacement and the hindering of humanitarian assistance by political or military actors.¹

We posit that host government actions are best explained by the strategic-level dynamics of their interactions with IHOs. Host governments and IHOs are governed by divergent institutional logics (Alford and Friedland, 1985). They inherently have conflicting strategic interests (i.e., tensions between interests) but, nevertheless, high interdependency (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). Since tensions between interests and dependency are not mutually exclusive, this raises the question as to how the two interact and impact on the delivery performance of IHOs in day-to-day (operational level) and medium term (tactical level) planning and

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¹ <https://www.ifrc.org/en/what-we-do/disaster-management/about-disasters/definition-of-hazard/complex-emergencies/> Accessed on 31 July 2015.

activities.

An in-depth multiple-case study approach is used to identify the core drivers and effects of host government actions on delivery performance, to establish patterns of linkages between them and to develop explanations for those linkages (Voss et al., 2002). The research logic is theory building, and we employ institutional theory to develop an initial understanding of the phenomenon. This approach of incorporating foundational theories in this type of research is highly recommended (e.g., Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan, 2007).

The main contributions of this research are that we develop a typology of host government stances in international relief operations and offer novel explanations for actions taken by host government relation to humanitarian logistics. We achieve “closeness to reality” and generate important insights into the humanitarian context by employing institutional theory (Kauppi, 2013; Kovacs and Spens, 2011). Consequently, this research also has major practical relevance for managers operating in this “high stakes” environment (Balcik et al., 2010).

2. Research background

2.1. Logistics decisions and delivery performance

Delivery performance in terms of lead-time and timeliness is a major priority in logistics, and it is strongly influenced by the quality of managerial decisions (Brown and Vastag, 1993; Gunasekaran et al., 2001; Vachon and Klassen, 2002). At the tactical and operational level, decisions regarding transport (including mode, the movement of aid workers, routing and scheduling) and inventory management (including sourcing) are important (Gunasekaran et al., 2001). Good delivery performance is especially crucial in a humanitarian setting given the high stakes associated with meeting beneficiary needs (Balcik et al., 2010).

2.2. The role and impact of host governments in humanitarian logistics

Host governments and international actors have obligations in major humanitarian crises that are outlined in various legal frameworks (for an overview, see Haider, 2013). In a crisis, host governments are obligated to adequately protect and provide for the affected populations within their borders. If they do not fulfil this obligation, they should allow international actors to intervene. Host governments then become responsible for coordinating and facilitating the operations of international actors by implementing the relevant (inter)national regulations. International actors are obligated to be impartial and provide assistance solely for humanitarian purposes. A myriad of international actors become involved in major crises, often including non-governmental and private organisations, United Nations agencies, donors, militaries and the International Committee of the Red Cross (Balcik et al., 2010). The focus of this study is limited to IHOs that offer direct material assistance to affected populations. Other important actors, such as the military and donors, fall outside the scope of this research.

Complex emergencies occur in fragile states where governments are usually weak and incapable of providing an appropriate response, or are autocratic and unwilling to fulfil their obligations (Albala-Bertrand, 2000). Put simply, state fragility relates to a host government's incapacity or unwillingness to provide public goods (Ziaja, 2012). Although fragility does not absolve host governments of their obligations, there are provisions within legal frameworks for shifting responsibility from host governments to more capable and/or neutral international actors. Therefore, IHOs can play a

pivotal role in complex emergencies, especially in areas of international armed conflict. Various legal frameworks apply in complex emergencies depending on the scale of the conflict. When there is no armed conflict, the international disaster response laws, rules and principles apply (as they do in natural disasters). Human rights law and international humanitarian law apply in civil armed conflicts and international armed conflicts respectively. Two issues addressed within these frameworks that directly affect humanitarian logistics are the sovereign consideration of declaring a state of emergency and the obligation to allow free passage of supplies for humanitarian assistance.

The declaration of a state of emergency is a necessary condition for immediate IHO involvement in non-armed and civil armed conflicts. When declared, IHOs can provide material assistance with limited bureaucracy. If a state of emergency is not declared, IHOs are essentially not welcome but can still intervene under non-emergency regulations. A consequence of this is that they likely face logistical challenges such as lengthy and complicated customs procedures for internationally sourced goods (Long and Wood, 1995; Martinez and Van Wassenhove, 2013; Van Wassenhove, 2006). The diversion of relief supplies by host governments or by other parties to the conflict can also be a problem (Menkhaus, 2010; Toole and Waldman, 1997). In international armed conflicts, there is no legal provision for government derogation based on sovereignty considerations. Consequently, the declaration of a state of emergency is not necessary for immediate IHO involvement. Security constraints then become the primary limiting factor.

The obligation to allow free passage of IHO supplies to affected areas varies under each of the legal frameworks. In unarmed conflicts, it is the host government's sovereign right to forbid passage—regardless of the humanitarian situation, and IHOs need to find ways to persuade the host government to grant it. In civil armed conflicts, human rights law obligates host governments to allow free passage of supplies on the basis of the right of civilians trapped in war zones to have access to life-sustaining supplies. In international armed conflicts, host governments are automatically obliged to allow free passage of supplies because there is no provision for derogation. However, the legal framework provisions related to armed conflict do not prevent host governments from imposing procedures that can slow response efforts. For example, they can hamper relief efforts by making it difficult to obtain travel permits to affected areas (Kovacs and Spens, 2009; Pettit and Beresford, 2005).

Despite the provisions made in the legal frameworks, several practical limitations are still faced in humanitarian logistics. First, as the International Disaster Database (EM-DAT) shows, the declaration of a state of emergency or a call for international assistance is rare. To date, the database captures only 14 complex emergencies since 1932 and just two since 2010 (Yemen and Central African Republic, both in 2012). Second, the anarchic nature of conflict and/or the weakening of structures leave little room for the rule of law in weak states while in autocratic states, host governments can inhibit IHO activity in ways that cannot be easily proven to violate the law. For instance, autocratic governments may impose blockades on materials for humanitarian assistance citing lack of IHO impartiality. This was the case in 2009 when the government of Sudan stopped relief activities by abruptly expelling 13 IHOs.

2.3. Drivers of host government impact on logistics decisions and delivery performance

In humanitarian logistics research, it is argued that IHOs intervene because the host government lacks capacity to respond to a disaster yet political interests are identified as primary drivers of

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