
Making Humanitarian Operations More Sustainable



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Do good intentions always lead to good outcomes? Experience shows that the lack of coordinated response can lead to future humanitarian and sustainability challenges.

Humanitarian operations take place in challenging contexts. When a minute can make a difference between life and death, stakeholders from international donors to local communities are hard pressed to make decisions quickly, often with poor information and constrained budgets.

In the Ukraine crisis, while temporary homes for refugees were quickly found in European countries, the need for more sustainable semi-permanent solutions becomes clear as the crisis wears on. Households that were quick to welcome refugees in times of crisis may not be able to host them for more than a few months. Beyond a roof over their heads, refugees need jobs and schools, among other needs, to get back on track. Moreover, given how quickly refugees have been matched with hosts, mismatch can happen and they might even end up worse off (e.g. subjected to harassment or trafficking). The lack of preparedness means that solutions – which are not necessarily sustainable – have to be improvised along the way.

More often than not, the immediate post-disaster emergency portrayed in the media are but the tip of the iceberg. In addition to addressing short-term needs to relieve acute suffering, humanitarian operations must balance the long-term need to sustainably recover and to strengthen local communities. In reality, humanitarian crises last more than nine years on average.

But does sustainability stand a chance in the face of the urgency of disaster response?

Is there room for sustainability?

Sustainability, as defined in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), covers a range of economic, social and environmental factors. Thankfully, there is growing awareness that it is fundamentally impossible to meet the SDGs if some people are left behind. In fact, the “humanitarian-development gap” has been recognised for decades.

Since the mid-1990s, the fields of humanitarian operations and sustainable operations have formed the cornerstone of my research agenda. This culminated in a workshop in 2019 on “How can we make humanitarian operations more sustainable?” as I transitioned to emeritus professor. The workshop, co-organised with Charles J. Corbett from UCLA Anderson School of Business and Alfonso J. Pedraza-Martinez from the Kelly School of Business, brought together over 100 academics, logistics practitioners in humanitarian organisations (HOs) and sustainability managers from industry.

During the workshop, we demonstrated how sustainability could be better integrated into humanitarian operations in spite of the tension between immediate and long-term needs.

Given that humanitarian operations span the entire disaster management cycle, HOs can – and have to – operate in more sustainable ways in each phase of the cycle. This requires stakeholders, including HOs, donors, and watchdog organisations to think differently.

New perspectives make a world of difference

In the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the influx of donated bottled water created mountains of plastic bottles that cluttered drains and caused flooding after heavy rains. How did good intentions go so wrong?

Haiti's experience highlights the importance of better alignment of humanitarian and environmental imperatives. At the core of this problem is material convergence – when an avalanche of in-kind donations arrive on site in the aftermath of a disaster. Better logistical coordination among HOs could have prevented the “second disaster” in Haiti.

In most disasters, water is critical only during the first two or three days before quickly becoming a low-priority item. The Pan-American Health Organization classifies donations as either urgent, high priority, low priority or non-priority. With this knowledge and with better coordination, improving material convergence can lead to reduced waste.

Ideally, donors would not contribute not donations in-kind, but cash that HOs can use to purchase the most-needed relief items. In the next best scenario, logistical support could prevent non-priority items from entering the disaster area, such as by sorting the items in the donors' home countries before shipping. There would be an appropriate level of coordination that ensures that relief items are sent to a specific receiving organisation, with a bill of lading, or cargo list, detailing the items in the package. Relevant local information from the disaster area could also ensure that priority items are in the most appropriate packaging, such as water in 10-litre bottles instead of small bottles.

Long-term vs short-term perspectives

Better planning and coordination cannot happen if stakeholders do not recognise that rather than a single event, the entire humanitarian operation – as detailed in the disaster management cycle – consists four phases: preparedness, response, rehabilitation and mitigation.

First, funders need to recognise that most funding systems pose a barrier to capacity building in the longer term. When donors earmark funds for emergency response, the same funds cannot be used for long-term investments such as improving coordination between local and global HOs. Unfortunately, such investments in preparedness are typically **categorised as overhead** and hence frowned upon by potential donors. Overcoming these barriers requires discussion with local communities, HOs, local governments, international donors and other stakeholders.

At the operational level, HOs need to recognise the importance of pivoting to a different time-scale when needed. During the Ebola virus outbreaks, the

World Health Organization's (WHO) operating model was designed to stop the outbreak within three months, but the Ebola virus programmes became longer and the operating model must change. Initially, the WHO rented 600 vehicles, but buying them might have been wiser and acquiring motorcycles would have helped them to reach rural areas with no paved roads more efficiently.

In fact, **merging supply chains** for short-term emergency response and long-term operations has enabled the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to expand its global warehouse network while reducing cost and lead time. This involves allowing stocks earmarked for long-term operations to be used in emergencies, and for stocks left over from emergencies to be used in longer-term operations. While this fruitful endeavour has led to both cost and time efficiency, it requires close collaboration between relief and development operations.

Global vs local

When disaster strikes, HOs do not always adequately include local communities even when these communities have invested in disaster preparedness. In fact, local knowledge is key to ensuring sustainability. A great deal of work remains to be done to improve coordination between global HOs and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

For global HOs to work more effectively with local HOs, they must accept that the people who live in a disaster area know the local conditions best. For example, dark bread was shipped internationally to Albania, which was not favoured by the local population. For months, international humanitarian workers were eating dark bread at every meeting to avoid throwing them away.

The voices of beneficiaries must be heard to implement sustainable solutions that respect their culture and dignity. Local volunteers are also immediately operational and familiar with the context, as we have seen in the Ukrainian crisis.

"Local or global" must again be addressed in procuring the necessary relief items. Although local procurement might be more sustainable, it is often stymied by the effectiveness of the global machinery. Using local procurement would require better interfaces between local and global organisations that operate using different technologies.

The more standardised offering by global HOs would reduce the need for coordination and detailed information, which could result in more efficient response. However, if disaster response is too standardised, it may not match local demands and would create more waste. Greater adaptation to local needs means that items are earmarked for specific populations, which reduces the flexibility achievable by pre-positioning supplies. This trade-off between the benefits and disadvantages of standardisation remains an important topic for operations management research.

Navigating trade-offs for sustainability

In many ways, tough trade-offs are required if sustainability is to be integrated in humanitarian response. At the end of the day, a key deterrent is cost. How should short-term and long-term damage and costs be measured and compared?

Sustainability in humanitarian operations involves diverse stakeholders, ranging from global donors to local beneficiaries. Stakeholders need to think differently about the balance between short-term and long-term interventions and the role of local vs. global organisations. At the same time, their decisions and action are often driven by their own metrics and incentives. Therefore, it is important that they set the appropriate metrics and incentives with a long-term perspective, such that they do not miss the woods for the trees.

While carbon footprint is a key measure of sustainability in supply chains, other environmental aspects may be more relevant in the humanitarian setting. There are no clear standards for measuring societal impact, even if intergenerational justice is often mentioned. There is a need for more benchmarking in the humanitarian sector, and those benchmarks can be more integrated in decision making.

Overall, when humanitarian operations are seen through the lens of the disaster management cycle, there are long-term actions that can improve their sustainability. Most of these actions must be put in place either before a crisis or during the long-term rehabilitation that follows the immediate response. It is more feasible to incorporate sustainability during preparation, rehabilitation, and mitigation than during the immediate response to disaster.

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