



Managing cultural conflicts for effective humanitarian aid

Juan Rodon*, Josep F. Maria Serrano, Cristina Giménez

ESADE Business School, Universitat Ramon Llull, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 September 2010

Accepted 29 August 2011

Available online 8 September 2011

Keywords:

Humanitarian aid
Operations management
Culture
Effectiveness
Aid organisations
Structuration theory

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the management of cultural conflicts that arise during the provision of humanitarian aid (HA). In particular, we study the cultural conflicts in the HA relationship between those delivering HA and the beneficiaries, and we examine how those delivering HA manage these conflicts. By drawing upon structuration theory, we conceptualise culture as consisting of three dimensions – systems of meaning, norms of behaviours, and power relations. We then develop a process model that shows the interactions between the HA organisation and the local community beneficiary of the aid and that shows how these interactions are mediated by culture. We illustrate the model with a case study that analyses the intervention of a non-governmental organisation during an outbreak of cholera in Mozambique in 2008. The case shows how the non-governmental organisation reflexively monitored its actions and consequences, creating a basis for adaptation and change in its practices. Furthermore, the case shows that culture is not immutable but dynamic – being constantly produced and reproduced during HA operations. From the results of the case study, we formulate some theoretical propositions that may guide further research in this area.

© 2011 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

An increasing number of humanitarian emergencies with a growing range of complexity are putting pressure on agencies to deliver humanitarian aid (HA) in the most appropriate and cost-effective way (HPG, 2005; Roh et al., 2008; EU, 2009). In the last decade, in the international humanitarian sector, various agencies from the United Nations and the World Bank as well as non-governmental organisations have started initiatives – for instance, the Sphere Project – that aim to improve the quality of humanitarian response, to enhance the accountability of agencies to affected communities, and ultimately to improve the effectiveness of aid (Sphere, 2011). These initiatives usually identify a set of standards that represent sector-wide consensus on best practices in humanitarian response. A common feature of these best practices is that aid agencies must consider, respect, and support the different humanitarian socio-cultural contexts and adapt their response programmes accordingly. Therefore, identifying the culturally appropriate practices for a given humanitarian response is a key concern for policy makers and managers of aid organisations.

Despite this practical recognition of the need for aid practices to fit with the cultural context of beneficiaries, research on HA in

the field of operations management has not paid attention to this issue. Prior research literature has shown that cultural differences impact the effectiveness of aid by influencing the coordination of the operations (Van Wassenhove, 2006; Pettit and Beresford, 2009; Balcik et al., 2010; Dowty and Wallace, 2010). Yet these studies mainly focus on the cultural differences between the organisations delivering aid at the expense of the cultural differences between those delivering HA and the beneficiaries. Let us take, as an example, the HA project of Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) in Somalia when a severe cholera epidemic began in February 1994 (Cañas, 2008) to illustrate how cultural differences between HA agencies and beneficiaries can be a source of disruption to humanitarian operations.

The intervention of MSF was mainly driven by the objective to control and avoid the spread of the epidemic. Accordingly, MSF created a centre for the treatment of cholera, gave advice to the health authorities, and performed ‘safe’ burials. This entailed minimising contact with corpses and maximising the hygienic and precautionary measures. The performance of ‘safe’ burials was a measure that created a major confrontation with the local community. The traditional burial ritual in the local community involved the participation of many people who were in contact with the corpse. These two facts made the ritual an important focus for the spread of the epidemic. Thinking in terms of operational effectiveness, that is, reducing the risk of the epidemic spreading, MSF determined it was best to remove the infected corpses and bury them without ritual. This action resulted in violence against MSF personnel and led the local

* Corresponding autor. Tel.: +34 932806162.

E-mail addresses: joan.rodon@esade.edu (J. Rodon), pep.maria@esade.edu (J.F. Maria Serrano), cristina.gimenez@esade.edu (C. Giménez).

community to abandon the use of the cholera epidemic centre. That is, an action designed according to effective operational parameters proved fruitless and ineffective due to clashes between the local culture and the intervention from aid workers. One of the first reactions of MSF's workers was to inform and educate the local community about how epidemics spread. MSF's workers also allowed the local community to perform their burial ceremonies with some precautionary measures to reduce the risk of contagion.

This example shows how a failure to pay attention to the local cultural systems reduced the effectiveness of the humanitarian response to the cholera epidemic in Somalia. In this respect, the goal of this paper is to develop a framework that enhances our understanding of (1) how cultural differences between HA agencies and beneficiaries lead to conflict, (2) how these conflicts impact the effectiveness of HA operations, and (3) how the HA agencies manage these cultural conflicts. By drawing upon structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), we develop a conceptualisation of culture (Walsham, 2002) and build a theoretical model to study the management of cultural conflicts that arise between organisations delivering HA and local community beneficiaries. We will illustrate the theoretical model with a case study of the non-governmental organisation Intermón Oxfam during an outbreak of cholera in Mozambique in 2008.

Our study makes several contributions to research and practice. First, in the field of HA operations, we present a process-based study that conceives humanitarian operations as involving dialectical tensions due to cultural differences between those delivering aid and the beneficiaries. The case study shows that an aid organisation can manage cultural conflicts by intervening on the beneficiaries' cultural milieu as well as on its own cultural assumptions and, by doing so, preserve the effectiveness of HA operations. Some studies have pointed out the effect of culture on humanitarian operations (Van Wassenhove, 2006; Pettit and Beresford, 2009; Balcik et al., 2010; Dowty and Wallace, 2010). Their focus, however, has been on the interactions between different organisations delivering HA. Our study analyses the interactions between those delivering HA and the beneficiaries. Second, we focus our study on Africa, which experiences some of the harshest living conditions in the world. Focusing on Africa, we try to cover the research gap identified by Kovács and Spens (2009, p. 522). "So far, studies covering the field have very much focused on Asia. Considering the impact of the regional context on the effects of a disaster, studies on other continents and also other disaster types has been called for". Third, we contribute to the field of operations management and supply chain management by analysing the HA operations through the lens of structuration theory. Despite calls for the use of structuration theory in the field (Lewin and Suchan, 2003), it has seen little theoretical and empirical application (e.g., Holweg and Pil, 2008). Using this theoretical lens, we contribute to extending the epistemological base of the operations management field. Finally, this paper contributes to practice by emphasising that although existing knowledge about the local cultural context that is embedded in the best practices can inform agencies in the planning stage, humanitarian responses also require an element of experimentation and learning. A cultural lens brings out this need for constant monitoring and adaptation of aid actions.

The paper is structured as follows. We begin by reviewing how prior literature on HA has dealt with culture to identify those salient issues that have not been addressed. Then, we present the theoretical concepts we draw on in the paper and develop a theoretical model. The case analysis follows with the presentation of the results. Next, we discuss the findings of the case. The paper ends with some contributions and lines for further research.

2. Culture and HA operations

The organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines HA as "assistance designed to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain and protect human dignity during and in the aftermath of emergencies" (OECD, 2010). HA includes: disaster prevention and preparedness; the provision of shelter, food, water, and sanitation, health services and other items of assistance for the benefit of affected people and to facilitate the return to normal lives and livelihoods; measures to promote and protect the safety, welfare and dignity of civilians and those no longer taking part in hostilities and rehabilitation, reconstruction, and transition assistance while the emergency situation persists. Activities to protect the security of persons or property through the use or display of force are excluded (OECD, 2010).

During the last decade, with the aim of improving effectiveness, researchers studied how to apply different supply chain techniques currently used in for-profit, uninterrupted environments to not-for-profit, interrupted contexts, such as HA operations. Some researchers have focused on planning and control (Sheu and Wacker, 1994), on inventory management (Beamon and Kotleba, 2006; Whybark, 2007; Tysseland, 2009; Taskin and Lodree, 2010), on information systems (Rietjens et al., 2007), or on performance measurement systems (Beamon and Balcik, 2008; McLachlin et al., 2009; Schulz and Heigh, 2009). Other authors have analysed the role of collaboration among the entities involved in HA (McLachlin et al., 2009; Balcik et al., 2010; Tatham and Kovács, 2010). Still others have focused on the identification of challenges in humanitarian logistics (Oloruntoba, 2005; Kovács and Spens, 2009) or on the analyses of key success factors (Pettit and Beresford, 2009; Oloruntoba, 2010).

Kovács and Spens (2007) indicated that although the three phases of humanitarian operations (preparation, immediate response, and reconstruction) are important in overcoming a disaster, most of the academic literature on humanitarian logistics has focused on the preparation phase for disaster relief. In this respect, the authors argue that "further research is needed in the field of humanitarian logistics, in order to support the planning and execution of the important operations of disaster relief" (Kovács and Spens, 2007, p. 110). In this paper, by analysing the actions and interactions of aid organisations with beneficiaries, we focus on the immediate response and, therefore, try to fill the void regarding the execution stage of HA.

There are several empirical studies suggesting that many of the challenges in the management of operations have a technical nature as well as a social nature. In particular, those social challenges are often grounded in culture (Flynn and Saladin, 2006; Stock et al., 2007; Zu et al., 2010), and they have been especially recognised by the logistics and operations literature that deals with HA operations (Van Wassenhove, 2006; Kovács and Spens, 2007; Perry, 2007; Pettit and Beresford, 2009; Balcik et al., 2010). For instance, Van Wassenhove (2006) and Balcik et al. (2010) recognised that cultural differences affect the coordination of humanitarian relief. Kovács and Spens (2007) and Perry (2007) noted that needs assessment after a disaster is affected by the cultural peculiarities of the disaster region. Perry (2007) stressed the need for cross-cultural training in HA operations given that all cultures have distinct features. Pettit and Beresford (2009) highlighted that, given the heterogeneity and multiplicity of actors in crisis situations, decision making cannot only be based on the structural elements of supply chains; rather, "cultural elements may play a decisive role and ultimately may determine whether or not an effective supply chain can ever be established" (Pettit and Beresford, 2009, p. 464). In summary, as noted by Oloruntoba (2005), "multicultural issues must be managed in a culturally sensitive manner, both within responding organisations and with local actors" (p. 514).

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات