

THE ROLE OF SUPPLY CHAINS IN EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Global logistics will play an increasingly important role in the response to future complex emergencies. We asked Giuseppe Saba, logistics expert and CEO of International Humanitarian City, for deeper insight into the issue that Covid-19 has brought to the world's attention.

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A HUMANITARIAN HUB FOR EMERGENCIES

Based in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, at a crossroads between Asia and Europe within reach by air of most of the world's population, is International Humanitarian City (IHC), an emergency response group. IHC focuses on preparedness and the pre-positioning of everything that could be necessary in the event of a disaster or an emergency, but also on the training of young people just starting out in the humanitarian field, and innovation, often in partnership with companies that have fresh ideas about what "aid" might entail today. Less an organization than a humanitarian "hub", IHC partners closely with the other bases that make up the United Nations Humanitarian Response Depot (UNHRD) network, in Brindisi, Italy; Accra, Ghana; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain; and Panama City, Panama. Some 460 individuals work there; they come from U.N. agencies including the World Health Organization (WHO), the U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA) and the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and other international and governmental organizations. There are also commercial companies that produce humanitarian and logistics-related products. A "society" of technology specialists and producers of relief equipment and supplies, IHC has become a pivotal player in emergency management and response at a time when such events are ever more frequent, especially in the global South.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAIN CAUSED BY COVID-19

When Covid-19 made itself known to humans in January 2020, demand for protective materials, diagnostics and patient treatment equipment surged, and while the stocks of WHO and UNHRD were large enough to handle the first wave of outbreaks, they were not sufficient for the pandemic that followed. The demand was so overwhelming that no one entity could have produced enough to meet it. Complicating matters further was the fact that a huge part of relief supplies are produced in Southeast Asia – China, India, Malaysia and Pakistan – where production already struggles to meet domestic demand. This gave rise to an intense competition among the hardest-hit countries to secure

supplies, initially in Europe, then across the Atlantic and other countries around the world. Wealthy nations battled against others with more limited financial resources, and as demand for protective equipment soared, so did its price.

In fact, it was not only production that collapsed, but the entire supply chain, i.e. the transport, warehousing, and dispatch of goods to countries in need, in line with predefined plans, and their distribution to end users. A drastic reduction in the number of passenger flights led to lesser availability for transporting supplies in the holds of aircraft, meaning that they have had to be transferred to cargo planes and some aircraft reconfigured into combi planes in order to transport them. This is the situation that the humanitarian community has had to face, and continues to face even now. And the cost of transport, like that of production, has also rocketed upwards. Once again, the gap between developed and low-resource countries is manifest, with the former able to speed up transport operations using flag carriers and military planes, which in times of Covid-19 means being able to treat the sick faster.

IHC: RESPONSE AND INNOVATION

While it is true that the pandemic caught us out with insufficient and non-optimally prepared stocks, it is also true that the IHC community was in the midst of planning a range of actions for the three-year period running from 2020 to 2022 that dovetailed with the demand that began to surge with Covid-19. The plan involves optimizing IHC's existing spaces to increase storage capacity in our warehouses (making room for another 22,000 pallets), in-house assembly of the personalized kits normally used during health projects and emergency interventions, and expanding IHC's cold chain areas for the storage of drugs and vaccines. Already underway, the plan has been accelerated due to the new pandemic; as is often the case during times of emergency, innovation is rushing forward.

IHC has successfully adapted its emergency response expertise to an unexpected scenario, serving also as a key partner to NGOs like CUAMM, which are being called upon ever more frequently by the field in Africa to help communities handle not only their everyday health needs, but also emergencies.