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The Outreach of Humanitarian Logistics Research

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The Outreach of Humanitarian Logistics Research

Abstract

Purpose – This aim of this article is to discuss the outreach of humanitarian logistics research through managerial relevance and access to research results.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a review article.

Findings – Rigor and relevance are both stressed for research to have an impact. However, the article finds that managerial relevance needs to be combined with access to research as to increase not only outreach but also impact overall.

Research limitations/implications – The review focuses on the empirical studies in this issue. This should not be mistaken to foster only these types of studies, nor only these types of empirical studies. Rather, the issue gives a first flavour of the variety of empirical research that is currently conducted in humanitarian logistics.

Practical implications – It is expected that a combination of managerial relevant research with a better access to research results will lead to a higher impact of these studies.

Social implications – Open access will increase the outreach as well as the impact of the research.

Originality/value – The article discusses the topic of outreach and impact of humanitarian logistics research. Previous studies have highlighted the need for empirical, relevant research, whilst here the idea is combined with questions of access.

Keywords: outreach, research impact, managerial relevance, humanitarian logistics research

Classification: research paper

1. Introduction

Humanitarian logistics research has often been criticized for being mostly conceptual and for lacking solid empirical studies (cf. Kovács and Spens, 2011). Also the *Journal of Humanitarian Logistics and Supply Chain Management* (JHLSCM) has repeatedly called for more empirical research, and for research that shows both elements of rigor and relevance – following Mentzer’s (2008) general uncompromising view on supply chain management research that should not choose between but show both criteria of rigor and relevance. The current number of JHLSCM is a start to answering this call, with empirical research underpinning all articles.

Yet empirical research is just one aspect of increasing managerial relevance, and relevance only one aspect to increase outreach and impact. The aim of this article is, therefore, to discuss the outreach of humanitarian logistics research through managerial relevance and access to research results.

2. The outreach of research

The uncompromising combination of rigor with relevance in research highlights the importance of “good” empirical studies. However, there is a large variety of methods that are used and usable in humanitarian logistics for conducting empirical research. Much research relies though on case studies or on optimisation models underpinned with empirical data. At the same time, field research can range from interview studies to focus groups, from observations to an action research approach. This is not to speak of the quantitative palette from survey research to simulation and optimisation modeling approaches. Lappenbusch (2006) reviews five of these methods for humanitarian research: experimental design, survey research, grounded theory, critical decision method, and action research. Whilst he admits these to be arbitrarily chosen, the selection highlights the variety of types of empirical studies that can be carried out in this field.

On the other hand, research impact is determined not by rigor and relevance alone, but also by outreach. No wonder that a researcher’s personal impact is often assessed in terms of citation indices (how many other researchers have quoted the person, the paper). The topic and the quality of a study of course results in a larger potential for citations, apart from

which, sheer access to the results of the study also play a role in the potential to build on its findings in further research (cf. Björk *et al.*, 2010). That said, citation indices only capture the impact of research on yes, research, and even for that they are disputed. The impact of research is though also important for education, management, and society. Gibson and Hanna (2003), for example, assess the usefulness of entire journals for their impact on research and teaching as well as for outreach. In their study, outreach is seen as the usefulness of a journal to logistics practitioners. Their final ranking of logistics journals incorporates the journal's merit in terms of outreach, which alongside Mentzer's (2008) emphasis on relevance stresses the importance of outreach to the logistics research community.

Social impact assessment (SIA) broadens the view from an outreach to practitioners to society overall. SIA does though not target research alone but can be applied to the entire spectrum of public services including humanitarian aid. Originating from the 1950s, SIA has come a long way: guidelines were developed, and SIA was subsequently adopted by various governments (e.g. the U.S. in 1983) and interorganisational bodies (e.g. the World Bank in 1986) to assess the impact of their (also humanitarian) interventions and funding mechanisms (McKinsey Social Sector Office, 2012). Of course, SIA is also used to assess research and funding instruments for research (Donovan, 2011). The social impact of humanitarian assistance is seen in the evaluations of (overall) aid effectiveness, which is measured in terms of the improvement of livelihoods and even the stimulation of economic growth (Doucouliagos and Paldam, 2005).

3. Improving the outreach of JHLSCM

Several efforts were undertaken to improve the outreach of JHLSCM and to bridge the much-quoted gap between practice and research. This number starts off a series of book reviews, for which, most importantly, books related to humanitarian logistics and supply chain management are evaluated from a practitioner as well as a researcher perspective. The book reviews are valuable not only as a summary that can be useful to determine where the main value of a books lies but also in providing newer insights to developments in practice and research. The contrast of a practitioner to a researcher view should prove useful for approaching textbooks and anthologies from different directions and for different purposes.

Improving outreach has been an important issue also from the publisher's perspective. In this we are particularly grateful to Emerald agreeing to make the journal an open access one. Open access will ensure that practitioners and researchers all over the world have the possibility to partake in the newest research results, wherever they are, and whichever means they have. Not only have we started to ask the question about "social implications" for each of our articles but also for the journal as a whole. Such an outreach may not be as important for other journals but readers of the *Journal of Humanitarian Logistics and Supply Chain Management* come from various NGOs and from a number of developing countries – settings to which research published in the journal applies the most. But also from a strict research perspective, access improves visibility but also immediacy, i.e. the possibility to build on previous results in subsequent studies, speeding up the research cycle (Björk *et al.*, 2010).

Last but not least, we are about to finish the move from e-mail submissions to a new system, our manuscript central. This system improves the service to authors who can now track the status of their article, and also writes some regular reminders to reviewers – not as if our reviewers would need any, of course. What is more, the system enables us to use EarlyCite, through which research results are available online even before they are assigned to a particular number of the journal. Such pre-publications again shorten the research cycle and make it possible to learn quicker from previous studies and to build on them.

4. The articles in this issue

This number starts with two book reviews, each book evaluated from a practitioner and a researcher perspective. *Steele* and *Beamon* both review the probably first textbook dedicated to logistics in the humanitarian sector, *Tomasini* and *van Wassenhove's* "Humanitarian Logistics" from 2009. Though not a manual, they deem it in unison to be an elementary and simultaneously, necessary introduction to the topic, which from a researcher perspective is rather useful in education. The next book, *Apte's* "Humanitarian Logistics: A New Field of Research and Action" is reviewed by both *Blansjaar* and *Soneye*. Differently from the previous book, this one focuses on tools and methods from operations research and is thus, a valuable overview of the literature using these.

Following the book reviews, the articles in this number again demonstrate the variety of topics and methods in humanitarian logistics research.

Right at the core of important concepts, *Cozzolino, Rossi and Conforti* discuss “**Agile and lean principles in the humanitarian supply chain**”, which they illustrate via the case of the United Nations World Food Programme. In this, they answer some of the criticism in the book reviews, which miss the link between disaster relief operations and post-disaster as well as development aid ones. As they argue, agility is not in fact applicable to all “humanitarian” operations in the broad sense, rather, the use of the concept is confined to particular phases of disaster relief, and to the urgency sense of emergency relief. Types of operations are also linked to the application of agile vs. lean concepts. In conclusion, and in contrast to much of previous literature, leanness is considered to have important application areas in humanitarian logistics. A remaining question is though how to switch between these alternative concepts in the same organisation (ramp up or close down operations) at different times.

The next article further exemplifies the differences between regular activities (here home health care performed by the Austrian Red Cross) and the carrying out of these activities during a disaster situation – in this case reoccurring floods in Upper Austria. *Hirsch, Rest and Trautsamwieser* assess the “**Trends and risks in home health care**” during different types of disasters. The focus is on vehicle routing and scheduling but another interesting aspect of the article is the discussion of home health care in urban vs. rural areas. A model, and based on it, software is developed for vehicle routing in different flood scenarios, taking into account changes in the availability and accessibility of staff as well as patients.

Health care systems are at the core of the third article of this issue as well. *Jahre, Dumoulin, Greenhalgh, Hudspeth, Limlin and Spindler* look at the complexity of drug supply chains in developing countries in the article “**Improving health in developing countries**”. The article is a combination of the efforts of researchers and practitioners and is based on a comprehensive study of the Ugandan health care system, highlighting main challenges through a combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses. The focus is on improving the performance of the system with regards to lead times, stock-outs and order frequencies. The article proposes a framework to show why different changes in the supply chain improve supply chain performance and shows that stock-outs can be met with a reduction of safety stock that together with postponement leads to a reduction of uncertainties and complexities.

The final article in this issue goes back to a more strategic question, the one of co-ordination. *Akhtar, Marr and Garnevaska* investigate the role of channel co-ordinators in their article “**Coordination in Humanitarian Relief Chains: Chain Coordinators**”. This is not a repetition of a call for more co-ordination but a critical evaluation of chain co-ordinators in horizontal (rather than the usual vertical) co-ordination structures. The case presented is that of a “semi-cluster approach” in the 2005 South Asian Earthquake – and again, research benefits from a previous experience as humanitarian logistics practitioner. The article presents the benefits and challenges of horizontal co-ordination such as the cluster approach, but most importantly, discusses the competencies required from a potential co-ordinator.

5. Final remarks

The articles in this issue give a flavour of a variety of empirical studies, ranging from interview studies to optimisation models to assessing a country’s health care system as a case. Such empirical studies increase the managerial relevance of research – and now, combined with the open access to JHLSCM, hopefully also outreach and impact. We are grateful to our publishers who supported us in the implementation of all these efforts and even initiated some of them. The ball is passed on to the research community to continue conducting rigorous and relevant research in humanitarian logistics and supply chain management.

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