

'Logistics has no Future'

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'Logistics has no future' is something that I have heard numerous times over the last few years from both colleagues and friends alike. This story is my personal journey and shows how I changed from, like so many others, agreeing with this sentiment to realizing there was another path. In the last seven years I have worked in four country offices as a logistician. It has been an incredible experience with plenty of opportunities to get to know different cultures and beautiful people around the world. Way back in 2001, when I embarked on my career to become a logistician, it certainly didn't sound very fascinating. Worth noting, is the fact that I come from a conservative society where working women is a relatively new phenomenon and certainly unheard of in the field of logistics.

In 2001, I was undertaking my MBA part time and was keen to learn more about management with in international organizations. I joined UNICEF later that year during the peak of Afghan emergency, with little idea of what logistics was all about. We were working in highly conservative and difficult to operate in tribal area on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. I was the only female in a group of ten or more. I was inexperienced and young but full of enthusiasm and keen to learn and work. The challenges were numerous and I had little or no support and no female peers. We immediately embarked on the massive 'Back to School' programme providing support to millions of children. Not many were willing to train a woman and many cultural taboos hindered my interactions at various levels. Asking too many questions was not on. I tried to educate myself and find books on the topic but couldn't find anything. Action learning and trial and error was the only option left to me. The first three months were difficult. It was highly unusual to even see a woman in a warehouse let alone being the only one actually working in one. This was considered inconceivable and totally out of place. I was seen as not belonging and the men felt no justification to treat me as a colleague. However, something that everyone walking in to that office soon noticed was that the place looked clean and highly organized. It was not only the improved aesthetics but also the discipline that came with it resulting in easily retrievable documents etc. It made office life easier and my male colleagues began to see the difference a woman or this woman can make. A proper filing system was introduced; regular reporting became a norm and office decorum improved considerably. With in six months I ended up being the in charge of the Logistics base. It was not a smooth crossing however it proved critical in preparing me for the challenges ahead.

I was still studying at night at the time, and would work from 8 to 5 and then go straight to my evening class till 9 o'clock in the evening. Due to huge workload, I would often miss class and have to do my reading while travelling. My teachers were very supportive and encouraging, and it was unbelievable when I scored the highest marks in the class. It was during this time my supervisor at work also started to believe in my potential and that it was then it dawned on me that I can 'do it'.

As time passed I became more familiar with the humanitarian assistance work and the alternative opportunities available in the sector. I had many colleagues and friends suggesting other career paths with in the UN. Looking back, I think the challenge of being the only women working in the logistics team made me stay the course. I wanted to see how far I could go as a woman with my education and my new found experience. Nothing around

me both in personal and professional sense was happening in the conventional way. Everyone said I wouldn't make it in a men's world. The glass ceiling exists in everywhere and our culture does not allow an equal playing field. In 2003, the Afghan program merged with Pakistan program and I was the only member of the logistics staff retained to look after cross border movements through the famous Khyber Pass. This gave me a great opportunity to gain more in depth knowledge of development issues and build on my experience.

I was the only logistician in UNICEF Pakistan office when the South Asia earthquake happened on 8 October 2005. The earthquake left 73, 000 dead and hundreds of thousands homeless and required a massive logistical response. At that time I was based in the border town of Peshawar assisting the Afghan program. Arriving on the third day of the earthquake there was still no support in terms of staffing and infrastructure. The operation started in a flour mill which had been affected by the quake and had badly cracked walls and little security. In those early days of the response the ground would often shake making me scream and run out of the warehouse for dear life. The paper work was done manually and for the first two weeks we squatted on the cold floor. There were no experienced support staff and the workers available at the mill were used to handling only grain. They needed training on everything from stacking to loading trucks and the only option was to give on the job training. Lack of sleep and severe weather conditions made it even more challenging to keep the flow of life saving supplies. As coordination improved between the humanitarian players we were able to move to more secure joint premises with WFP. We were able to pitch our own temporary warehouse or rubhalls, hire guards and additional support staff.

During the first few days there was no access to the affected areas by road. Aid agencies relied on air transport. We used MI 8 and slings to transport volumetric supplies. The roads between the towns of Abbottabad and Mansehra were totally jammed with traffic. Since it was the month of Ramadan our team used to break the fast or iftar in the car every day. Our day started at 6am with the drive to Mansehra and we returned exhausted in the evening having taken hours to cover the mere 20 kilometers journey. We worked in to the night on reports and had a few hours of disrupted sleep rushing outside 2 or 3 times a night due to after shocks.

With the snow fast approaching and with increasing logistics bottlenecks due to access, UNICEF increased its capacity and mobilized additional base camps and mobile storage tents. It also contracted a fleet of trucks as well as more staff with relevant expertise to manage the implementation of the operation. Given the access difficulties helicopters were used for several months. WFP, UNHAS, UNICEF and NGOs all work together to ensure that the most urgently needed relief items are transported as quickly as possible out of transit hubs to the final destinations.

My biggest challenge, however, continued to be the inherent low recognition of logistics activities. At my level dealing with senior managers was an uphill task. I had to make people understand why we need to follow certain rules in logistics and be accountable. A common belief was that everything is acceptable in an emergency situation and we don't need to account for anything that is released from our stocks. I made head way when I realised I needed to speak the language that the managers understood. Asking questions like who will be responsible at the time of audit was the required wake up call. It helped me get the much needed support from management and ensured proper processes and documentation were adopted despite the emergency situation. My deepest concern is always that the right kind of support is provided to the right people at the right time with out waste and delay. This was possible only if staff at the decision making level recognize the importance of the logistics function. The logistics team should not be called only at the eleventh hour for distribution but should be involved right at the planning level where we can contribute to making realistic and achievable plans. I advocated for the whole team to focus on the end result – the beneficiaries.

Looking back the most difficult part of this massive emergency was training the local staff prior to the arrival of outside support. Despite successfully distributing about fourteen million dollars worth of supplies in the first

phase of the emergency in two districts alone, life would have been much easier had we have had formally trained staff.

- ❖ From my own perspective, I learned a lot during the Afghan emergency working along side experienced logisticians. The first and only time I received any formal logistics training was after two years of working in the logistics field when we had the opportunity to attend a five-day regional workshop. For most of the four years before the start of the FRITZ course I relied upon on the job experience, observing best practices and a lot of common sense. However, there was always a desire to have more in depth knowledge and formal training. With not much literature available and even less that actually address the needs of humanitarian logistics ...the only option was ...to surf the web. It is may be this reason that when the course started at the height of the Earthquake emergency, I somehow found time to read and complete assignments. I believe it went a long way in broadening my professional horizon. I now have greater understanding of the need to have a cluster approach, how we pool our resources for maximum utilization, what are the best practices and bench marks etc. I now have a theoretical framework underpinning my work experience and my logistics work complemented my areas of study perfectly. For instance when studying the warehousing unit, my own work involved setting up a warehouse in Mansehra District and then later relocating this facility. A similar theoretical task was part of the course content. Despite sometimes having to wake up at four in the morning to finish an assignment, the course gave me a fresh new approach to my daily work and I was able to apply my newly acquired knowledge.

Mid way through the FRITZ course I went on mission to Kenya, to assist in the flood emergency and make good use of my experience and training. The response was efficient and we managed to reach the beneficiaries in relatively short time due to good coordination, staff mobilization and resource sharing. The capital of North Eastern Province in Kenya became my new duty station. It turned out to be a small town with one hotel, one main road and a few dirt tracks. Two hundred and fifty thousand people were affected by the floods. The severe rains had washed away all road access leaving us with the only option of air transport.

I was again faced with a very conservative and tribal society. I was in an extremely challenging environment this time with little knowledge of the culture and the added language barrier. However, the experience gained from Afghan programme was invaluable. I was once more the only woman, wearing a head scarf, seemingly frail and yet again not belonging. However, the boys were in for a surprise. It took a little while before they realized we were a team and needed to work like one if we were to successfully provide the much needed support to the affected communities. Like my other experiences, once I was accepted, it was smooth sailing from then onwards. Assistance was provided in close collaboration with other aid agencies. UNHAS provided helicopters which were used for both passengers and supplies. We shared resources and complimented our efforts by combining food and non food items for the beneficiaries.

As soon as the procedures were in place, contracts signed and staff trained I was asked to assist in Nairobi to provide support at the regional office. This was my first experience of looking after regional logistics and it proved very exciting. We were providing key logistical support to Kenya, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda as well as Somalia. The mission was short but was an excellent learning opportunity.

By early 2008, I had successfully finished my FRITZ course and this resulted in request to conduct logistics training to UNICEF staff in Myanmar. I was thrilled to be in a position to increase the logistics capabilities of other colleagues in the region. My efforts to pass on newer methods and best practices also continued with my own staff and local governmental and non governmental partners.

In May 2008, shortly after my visit to Myanmar the country was hit by the worst cyclone its' history. I was immediately asked to return to Yangon to join the emergency response. The visa formalities took longer then expected. By the time I arrived the local team had already identified a warehouse run by volunteers. It was in total chaos and the untrained team had no clue how to handle the influx of supplies resulting in delays and further disruption. Getting trained staff in the country was not easy in spite the relentless efforts of the UNICEF country team. There was little choice but to continue with the untrained staff. Nothing could wait, there were coordination meetings to attend, databases to set up, transport to arrange as well as finding service providers, identifying staff and setting up warehouse procedures. Once again there were no weekends and we worked till the early hours. Finally, we received badly needed additional international assistance helping to share the workload. My mission was extended to four months and half way through I was asked to stay for an additional six months.

As we are all too aware, the world is becoming increasingly prone to all kinds of emergencies requiring logistics specialists to be in ever greater demand. However, ongoing training in logistics in a humanitarian context is limited and refresher courses for those already working in the field are unheard of. To date, I am the only UNICEF staff member in the Asia Pacific region to successfully complete the FRITZ course. Many of my colleagues continue to rely upon the experimental and peer learning processes. There is need for more structured in-service training and mentoring opportunities for logistics staff in a humanitarian context giving the profession the recognition it deserves.

If someone asks me today why I would like to stay in logistics, the answer is simple. I know I can not only survive in this profession but contribute and thrive. Secondly, I have the opportunity to change the traditional mind set about women and humanitarian work and move away from stereo types. This generation of women is still struggling against the odds so the next generation will be able to enjoy some of its hard won gains. We need more women with the right kind of approach to humanitarian assistance in the third world countries like Pakistan.