

Humanitarian agility in action

By the INSEAD Humanitarian Research Group

What would you do if your long-standing and well-functioning supply chain stops working from one day to another? Would you be able to quickly reengineer it? The case study “Humanitarian Agility in Action” tells the story of UNICEF, one of the largest humanitarian organisations in the world, how the Saudi-Arabian-led bombing broke their vital supply lines into war-torn Yemen abruptly, and how the organisation managed to swiftly adjust.

In March 2015, a Saudi-led coalition initiated an air and naval blockade for the whole of Yemen, and simultaneously commenced airstrikes to hinder rebel groups in an on-going civil war. All of this in a country where 15.9 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance. Notwithstanding these challenges, and others like safety concerns, depleted fuel resources, damaged infrastructure, failing communication, and a limited staff, UNICEF orchestrated a successful response. By setting up a forwarding hub in Djibouti and using dhow vessels (small traditional ships) to reach less utilised and more strategically located Yemeni ports, UNICEF quickly redesigned their supply chain.

Written by Professor Luk Van Wassenhove, Charles Delagarde, and Joachim Mikalsen, the case study analyses the secrets behind UNICEF’s response and highlights what organisations can learn. Much depends on having the right organisational and strategic capabilities in place, the case study reveals. The key capabilities are strongly related to the concept of strategic agility and its three pillars: strategic sensitivity, collective commitment, and resource fluidity. The case study discusses how UNICEF (and other organisations) can develop strategic agility as a much needed organisational capability in a constantly changing and unpredictable environment.

The case covers all aspects of supply chain management, and is suitable for supply chain and strategy classes, as well as classes on organisational capacity building, change management and fast decision making processes. Insights are of practical value in the humanitarian and commercial sector, since both are operating in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world.

Case website: <https://cases.insead.edu/humanitarian-agility/>