

The Fritz Institute Triggers for Innovation – New Models for Change and Social Entrepreneurship

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What do you need to mount a humanitarian relief effort? Donations of the needed materials, whether food, water, shelter, and/or tools. Permits to operate in the afflicted area. Strong arms to load and unload the aid. And some way of moving it. Logistics is a cornerstone of humanitarian relief, but the information revolution in "supply chain management" that brought increased efficiency and lower costs in the commercial sector wasn't visible in the humanitarian relief arena.

Until now.

The Fritz Institute is an organization dedicated to bringing modern logistics techniques to the world of disaster relief, and to help build "institutional memory" for humanitarian agencies. Founded in 2001 by Lynn Fritz and Dr. Anisya Thomas, the Institute provides logistics software and a network of knowledge and partner resources for organizations large and small engaged in global humanitarian efforts. The Humanitarian Logistics Software, built in coordination with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, brings the experience and best

practices from the commercial sector to bear on the problems of the humanitarian relief delivery process. Their annual conferences and "Network of Knowledge" capture the evolving lessons from humanitarian efforts in order to develop and document broad solutions for common problems.

Dr. Thomas, now the Managing Director of the Fritz Institute, spoke with me yesterday about the Institute's programs and what it believes to be the challenges it will face in the near future.

"In all projects, we play the role of enabler," Dr. Thomas told me. The Institute is a virtual organization, with only five actual employees -- but with partnerships around the world.



Their logistics software is commercial quality, but is made freely available to humanitarian agencies. The introduction of logistics software and systems to these groups has been transformative: "a renaissance."

The software uses Microsoft's .NET system, and runs on Windows2000 Server; I asked whether they had considered using free/open source software instead. "We go back and forth about the use of open source. We support the idea in principle, but we see some problems with the approach," she replied. There does-

n't appear to be a sufficiently large community of programmers with the necessary expertise to build an open source equivalent of their Humanitarian Logistics package, for example. In addition, they're fearful of an open source version being adopted by commercial users, and the development becoming too focused on business needs at the expense of the needs of the humanitarian sector as a result. Cost isn't an issue -- Microsoft has agreed to donate licenses as needed -- and neither is source code availability. "Interested programmers in humanitarian agencies can have access to the source code as needed."

The Institute's mission is to equip the humanitarian relief system with the capacity to deal with problems they're not capable of dealing with otherwise. To change the system of providing humanitarian relief you need to engage many parts of the system. Improving the efficiency of relief logistics is one approach. The Network of Knowledge is another.

"Humanitarian agencies are often so focused on reacting to new sets of problems that the process of institutionalizing learnings is stunt-



ed." Relief organizations often don't have the time or bandwidth to learn from their own experiences. The Network of Knowledge brings together a partnership of five sectors: private sector companies, academia, humanitarian organizations, donors, and the media, each with an interest and unique experiences regarding the evolving practice of humanitarian relief. The Network of Knowledge connects these five together in an effort to retain and build on the knowledge accumulated over time from ongoing efforts, in order to construct an "institutional memory" for humanitarian agencies.

The knowledge network doesn't just support Western relief efforts. The Fritz Institute, working with the Africa Red Cross/Red Crescent, has now opened a "Capacity Building in Africa" program. "It's definitely about building up the ability of local institutions to handle situations before they become crises," Dr. Thomas told me. The Capacity Building program doesn't focus just on logistics and technological capacity, although these are definitely part of it; Fritz is also helping to build local media and communications partnerships, and alliances with the private sector and academic communities. Dr. Thomas said that the Capacity Building program has been welcomed by local groups



wanting to make certain their "fates are not decided by Western donors."

I asked what she thought would be the key challenges in the next few years. "Donor fatigue" is a threat, simply due to the relentless growth of relief needs. "There's been a dramatic rise in the number of vulnerable people around the world. Humanitarian relief agency resources are being stretched now more than ever. It's one disaster after another." Combating donor fatigue requires both more efficient use of donor resources and "more transparency." Greater "professionalization" of humanitarian relief efforts will lead to greater trust by donors, and by the public.

Dr. Thomas then listed three big global problems she saw as being the greatest triggers for relief needs

-- and they'll come as little surprise to WorldChanging readers: "Global warming; urbanization, especially with regards to clean water; and AIDS." Relief efforts are further complicated by the question of security, as relief workers increasingly become targets. Dr. Thomas told me that when Fritz personnel visited Iraq last year to evaluate the humanitarian situation, Margaret Hassan was their host.

What's more, the problems intersect and compound each other. Urbanization problems influences AIDS, global warming affects urbanization problems -- "it's a nexus of crises." As disasters build on each other, the humanitarian response becomes more difficult.

But difficult does not mean impossible. The Fritz Institute, through its expertise in logistical efficiency, its active efforts to build an institutional memory for the world of humanitarian relief, and its ongoing program of helping to equip local communities with the tools and resources to avert disasters, is increasingly critical to making sure that the global humanitarian response is there when it's needed. For those who are the most vulnerable, the world is a better place because of the Institute's work.