

# Barriers to customs entry at the time of disaster in developing countries: mitigating the delay of life-saving materials

*Rebecca Turner<sup>1</sup>*

## Abstract

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When a disaster strikes and a request for international assistance is received, an increasing number of actors respond to the needs of the affected population, and one of the first governmental entities that they meet when they arrive in the disaster-stricken country is the customs administration. Unfortunately, very few customs administrations are adequately prepared for the possibility that they may, one day, receive a huge number of incoming flights in a short period of time. Furthermore, over-regulation leads to unnecessary bureaucratic bottlenecks, which slow the entry and distribution of relief. Aid providers are frustrated by unnecessary delays and higher costs. Unprepared customs administrations suffer countless administrative headaches. This research focuses on the causes for delay in the movement of life-saving materials through Customs and the associated barriers. The article includes a comprehensive qualitative analysis drawing from the literature and informant interviews and is coupled with a System Dynamics model. After reviewing the system inefficiencies discovered, recommendations for the way forward are made.

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## 1. Introduction

With a greater onset of disasters both natural and man-made, there is a dire need for efficient and effective international response to disasters where countries have requested international assistance. Delivering the right response and relief consignments is extremely important and time plays a major role in how many lives can be saved. If the international response is calculated, resourced, and backed by donors, but does not reach the affected persons in time, lives may be lost and the effort rendered ineffective. The delay of life-saving materials, therefore, is of critical importance in the humanitarian supply chain.

The first governmental entities met upon arrival at the disaster-stricken country are the immigration and customs administrations. Unfortunately, very few customs administrations are adequately prepared for the possibility that they may, one day, receive a huge number of incoming flights in a short period of time. In addition, over-regulation leads to unnecessary bureaucratic bottlenecks which slow the entry and distribution of relief. Aid providers are then frustrated by unnecessary delays and higher costs. Unprepared customs administrations suffer countless administrative headaches. The complaint that relief consignments face delay at the Customs point of entry at the time of the disaster has risen to the forefront as a major inhibitor to serving beneficiaries. ‘Stories of relief shipments delayed at customs processing points for months after they would have been useful are well known, says Elyse Mosquini of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)’ (UNOCHA 2012, p. 2). However, most complaints only state that there was a delay without getting to the root of this problem. Take, for example, a publication on Early Warning and Early Action in West and Central Africa prepared

by the IFRC in 2008. In a section debating challenges and lessons learned about preparedness and response in the case of floods in Togo, the IFRC noted, ‘some kits were available from the Lagos office and arrived at Lome within 24 hours. However, other NFIs like blankets and mats had to be purchased in Ghana, and took three days before reaching Lome, due to border crossings’ (IFRC 2008, p. 18). The complaint of a delay at the border crossing is mentioned as a challenge but there is no further mention in the publication whereby the cause of the delay is addressed.

In the major tsunami in Indonesia on 26 December 2004, there were countless complaints of shipped relief consignments never reaching the beneficiaries. Most complaints were that it was an overwhelming response for a customs administration which had very little capacity. A freight forwarder involved in the response diagnosed the delays or goods never reaching beneficiaries as the amount of unsolicited goods sent without a local consignee. The processing of the unsolicited goods delayed those goods that did have the proper paperwork with a local consignee.

Guidelines to Specific Annex J, Chapter 5, Relief Consignments, of the Revised Kyoto Convention states, ‘the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance is dependent to a large extent on the speed with which it can be furnished. It is therefore, imperative that Customs administrations be as facilitative as possible and be prepared to rapidly clear goods that, as a result of catastrophic events, are being forwarded as aid’ (World Customs Organization 2000, p. 3). This makes the case that if there are stalls or delays with customs administrations for any reason, the humanitarian response may not be as effective as it could be if the customs approval process flowed smoothly. There are also experts, such as Kuenhe + Nagel who pose the view that ‘it is easier to blame local authorities [for inefficiencies] and has become the norm’ (personal communication, March 2013) as a criticism for looking only to the local customs entities for improvements.

Bekele Geleta, Secretary General of the IFRC, claims that regulatory mechanisms like customs clearance can be seen as impediments in the aftermath of a disaster rather than tools to enhance the effectiveness of a response, and to assert that well-designed systems and processes are critical to meet the needs of beneficiaries and can be used to swiftly direct international assistance to where it is most needed and ensure quality and accountability are maintained in the process (IFRC 2011, p. 3).

Delays in Customs are symptomatic of problems within the context of the entire international system and implications of such delays should be explored beyond solely the capacity of the local authorities. Oftentimes, the cause of delay is not the fault of customs administrations, but rather lies with the international organisations (IOs) sending humanitarian assistance without the proper paperwork.

Therefore, the intent of this article is to investigate the barriers causing the delay of life-saving materials and relief consignments being processed through the customs point of entry at the time of a disaster in developing countries. This should, in turn, provide grounds for making recommendations that are not unilateral or partial but rather, open room for dialogue and discussion.

## 2. Investigating the barriers to entry

The most salient causal explanations behind customs delays from varying parties involved – donor governments, local governments, aid agencies, private logistics companies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and IOs – were determined after a literature analysis and qualitative research.

To build on the literature and primary research for more informative analysis, the variables within the system were formed into a Causal Loop Diagram, a methodology from System Dynamics, so that they could be analysed for insight and feedback from these interactions to account for nonlinearities. In studying the interactions, inefficiencies can be more easily determined. Causal loop diagrams, ‘concise and visual, reveal the interconnections [between variables] both obvious and hidden. They can be used

to capture the mental models of individuals and capture hypothesis about dynamic behavior' (Morecroft 2007, p. 51). According to Morecroft, 'each link [in the causal loop diagram] is assigned a polarity, either positive or negative. A positive "+" link means that if the cause increases then the effect increases too. A negative "-" link means that if the cause increases then the effect decreases' (Morecroft 2007, pp. 39-40). The System Dynamics precedent for use in supply chains to determine inefficiencies within a context of multiple disaggregated parts could be useful in the same type of application for determining the delays in customs procedures as part of a much larger supply chain in international disaster response.

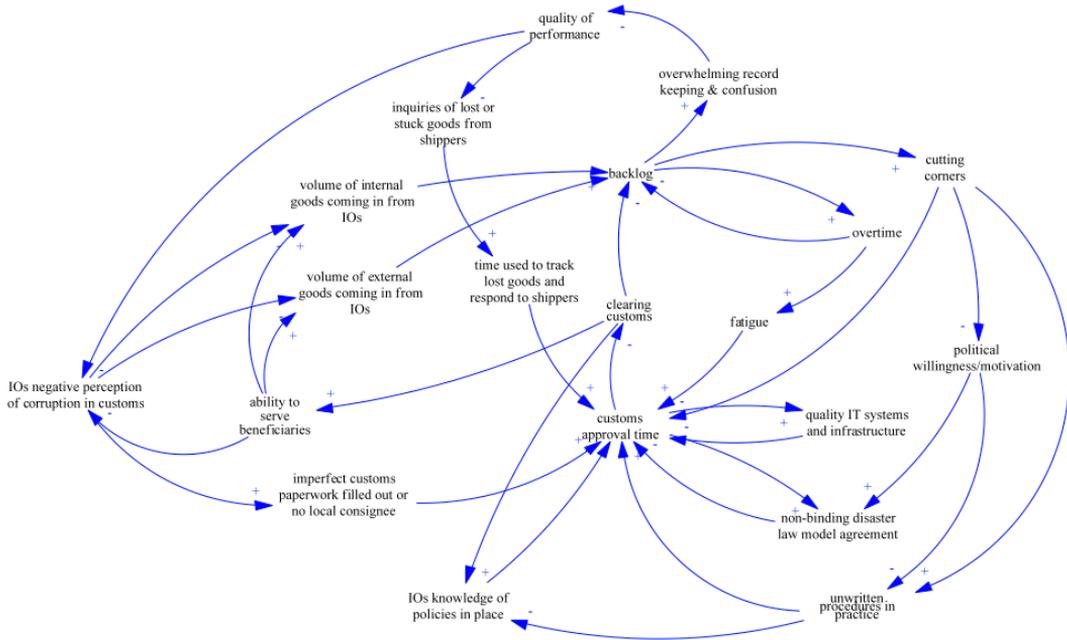
In this way, the unilateral, causal explanations of customs inefficiencies that were difficult to make sense of as isolated variables, in that they were indicative of only one symptom of a much larger issue, became easier to rationalise in a nonlinear, dynamic system because they are interrelated with other causes. Critical variables for investigation include:

- Time used to track lost goods and respond to shippers
- Clearing customs
- Customs approval time
- Backlog
- Overtime
- Fatigue
- Cutting corners
- Overwhelming recordkeeping and confusion
- Quality of performance
- Inquiries of lost or delayed goods from shippers
- Political willingness/motivation
- Unwritten procedures in practice
- Quality IT systems and infrastructure
- Non-binding disaster law model agreement
- IOs' and INGOs' knowledge of policies in place
- Volume of external and internal goods coming in from IOs
- Ability to serve beneficiaries
- Imperfect customs paperwork filled out or no local consignee
- IOs' negative perception of corruption in Customs

## **2.1 Backlog, overtime, and fatigue**

One reinforcing dynamic in Figure 1 that causes the customs approval process to slow is the backlog of incoming relief consignments and the effects that backlog has on local customs officials. Backlog is defined in this case as the amount of relief consignments coming into the customs point of entry that are waiting to begin the customs approval process. When the backlog grows large, customs officials work more overtime hours to process the backlog. When overtime hours worked increase, the backlog decreases causing the balancing loop. But when customs officials implement this corrective action, another effect, fatigue, is caused, which then reinforces the initial action that they were trying to correct. When officials work 24/7 during the immediate aftermath of a disaster, fatigue sets in. The absolute number of goods cleared in 24 hours after the disaster may increase over the non-disaster rate, however, as officials become more fatigued, the approval process per consignment takes more time. This means that fewer goods are cleared per week during the disaster and the backlog is not reduced as quickly as when officials were working without fatigue.

Figure 1: Causal loop diagram



Source: Turner 2013.

## 2.2 Political willingness, motivation, and unwritten procedures in practice

When customs officials remove unnecessary document checks and paperwork from the approval process, they may come to question the importance of these procedures. The more corners cut without repercussion, the more a sense of futility causes workers to become less motivated. This is especially true when workers see their superiors enjoying higher salaries and delegating the work. Take, for example, the Pakistani customs administration where, ‘the salaries of low-ranking customs employees make it impossible for them to maintain reasonable standards. At higher levels in the customs hierarchy, however, salaries are more than comfortable and senior Pakistani officers [enjoy] ostentatious living and extravagant expenditures have become the norm’ (Hors 2001, p. 19).

Unwritten procedures can stem from lack of motivation to write, implement and disseminate procedures and/or a political unwillingness to change the disaster importation laws for humanitarian relief consignments. The ‘Regional Seminar on the Role of Customs in Natural Disaster Relief Santo Domingo Seminar Report’ confirms ‘the political willingness of the countries is required to make changes to the existing legislation in order to incorporate the principles presented in the international agreements’ (WCO/OCHA/IFRC 2012b, p. 12). But, when there are more unwritten procedures in actual practice, the approval process time increases. At the ‘Role of Customs in Natural Disaster Relief Seminar’ in Bangkok, regional organisers included the World Customs Organization (WCO), United Nations (UN), and IFRC, and participants, government ministries and customs officials cited difficulties such as a lack of communication and coordination between Customs and the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), the fact that customs procedures are not always in line with international obligations, and a general lack of enforcement of the relevant rules and procedures (WCO 2012, p. 4). Those same challenges were mentioned at the regional seminar in Santo Domingo where participants emphasised ‘the lack of special procedures during emergencies, the lack of communication between donors and the government, and the lack of clarity and procedures when it comes to disasters’ (WCO/OCHA/IFRC 2012b, pp. 4-5).

### 2.3 IOs' and INGOs' awareness of customs procedures in place

If unwritten procedures are implemented without proper communication, the IOs and humanitarian actors are unaware of the necessary protocols they should follow when sending a relief consignment including all of the correct, requested paperwork, certificates, and registration with the shipped consignment. Consequently, the customs approval time can increase.

Another challenge for IOs' awareness of customs procedures relies on whether or not the customs agencies post updated regulations or required documents on their website. If procedures were previously posted online, they do not often state the specific changes to procedures and protocols for emergency situations or the import regulations for relief consignments. This adds to the time it takes to approve consignments coming through Customs and is, thereby, a reinforcing action in the loop leading to higher backlog. According to an interviewee of the Red Cross, customs delays 'depend on the status of the Agency, INGO or other foreign institution in the Country [if they already have a presence in-country] and the knowledge of the international humanitarian organisations [responding to the crisis and importing aid]'.

Regional representation from Customs at the 'Regional Seminar on the Role of Customs in Natural Disaster Relief' cited additional difficulties that present problems for their administrations as the lack of awareness that 'only NGOs [non-governmental organisations] registered in the country receive the legal facilities [like tax exemption], [sometimes NGOs send] poor quality donations, and NGOs taking advantage of disaster situations to operate in an unlawful manner' (WCO/OCHA/IFRC 2012, pp. 4-5), that is, not filling out proper importation documentation.

On some occasions, the IOs' lack of awareness, whether their fault or not, becomes a burden on the affected country's government because they send poor quality donations, take advantage of the disaster situation to further their own objectives, send the improper assistance, or simply do not adhere to procedures in place at the time of importing relief consignments or relief personnel and equipment. Ms Wasti, from Pakistan Customs Collectorate, cited the key customs challenges as 'a lack of awareness among donors of customs formalities and procedures, inadequate documentation provided to support the importation of relief goods by donors and assisting agencies, and a lack of capacity of Pakistan Customs to process large-scale relief consignments in an emergency' (WCO 2012, p. 6). NGOs can sometimes behave in an ad hoc fashion and operate as they wish, circumventing local policies.

### 2.4 Consignments clearing Customs

There is additional feedback that affects IOs' knowledge of policies in place which comes from relief consignments that have successfully cleared Customs. When the first relief consignments are cleared, the customs clearing process also becomes clearer in terms of the organisation's knowledge of proper protocols for shipping to *country x* at the time of a disaster. The spread of this knowledge amongst humanitarian actors thereby decreases the customs approval time because there are less relief consignments sent by new organisations that are unaware of the policies in place. This responsibility is executed by the Log Cluster which, following the disaster, posts best practice for importing into *country x* to spread to other partner and affiliated organisations.

Another reinforcing action that affects approval time is the quality of infrastructure and/or IT systems that are in place following a disaster.

### 2.5 Quality of infrastructure

An interviewee from IFRC Panama cites the delays as being dependent on the type of disaster and the infrastructure that may have been damaged during the disaster. He noted Haiti as being a difficult case for customs and import processing because the 'entire Haitian system [infrastructure] collapsed, and the airport was not functioning' (personal communication, May 2013). Some of the customs officials had even lost their lives.

One can certainly see the correlation between the quality of infrastructure in place and a longer customs approval time. The freight forwarder expert who was coordinating response to Haiti stated, ‘freight forwarders operating in the Haiti earthquake were effective in that they moved their shipments to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, where there was proper infrastructure in place to handle the amount of goods coming in’ (personal communication, March 2013). This is consistent with the IFRC interviewee’s claim that the infrastructure was an obstacle to customs processes in Haiti whereby the Dominican Republic had infrastructure in place that was able to help process the incoming relief consignments and was willing to collaborate to receive the shipment of humanitarian aid for Haiti as a free transit country (Apolinario 2012).

## **2.6 Quality of IT systems**

Further to the consideration of physical infrastructure in place, IT equipment and automated processes also affect customs approval time. According to the work of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) on the Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA) project taking place in more than 90 countries internationally, automating customs legislation and processes in place can cut down the time it takes to approve consignments immensely. In a recent case, the approval time, in peace time, was cut from two months to two and a half hours (personal communication, August 2013).

The expert at Kuenhe + Nagel poses that ‘less than 50% of the delays are a result of [unsophisticated] IT systems or a lack thereof, inefficient policies, or a lack of trained customs officials’ (personal communication, March 2013). While this reinforcing behaviour affecting delay may be one causal hypothesis of the problem, it does not explain the entire problem nor does it encompass all system inefficiencies.

## **2.7 Recordkeeping, quality of performance, inquiry of lost or delayed goods, and time to track lost or delayed goods**

With consideration for Customs’ responsibility to protect public health and safety by controlling imports, the quality of customs performance will be measured by the number of safe and non-illegal goods to be cleared through Customs and successfully reach the affected population, intended users, or beneficiaries.

If there is a small number of goods clearing Customs because of a long approval time and an increasing backlog, recordkeeping becomes overwhelming and more confusion ensues. When there is overwhelming recordkeeping and increased levels of confusion, the quality of performance decreases. When there are less goods being received by the beneficiaries, the number of inquiries from those senders whose goods are lost or delayed increases. Increases in inquiries result in more time spent tracking lost or delayed goods and responding to shippers. This becomes a reinforcing behaviour because when more time is used to respond to lost or delayed goods and the recordkeeping process is overwhelmed, the customs approval time of new shipments arriving will increase. An expert from World Vision noticed that ‘local officials could do a better job of documenting the process, the approval, and how to implement’ (personal communication, April 2013).

## **2.8 IOs’ negative perception of Customs, incoming volume of goods from IOs, imperfect paperwork**

If the quality of performance declines, the IOs’ negative perception of Customs increases as can be seen in Figure 1.

Without being informed as to why the goods were delayed, lost or rejected during the customs approval process, the organisations that do not see their goods reaching the beneficiaries assume that they must have been stolen, which further reinforces their negative perception of customs efficiency. While

opportunistic or desperate behaviour may sometimes be the case for goods that do not reach the intended user, this is often not the reason that relief consignments do not reach the beneficiary. Goods that are typically rejected or more closely scrutinised at the time of disaster are those that can greatly impact the market. Generally, according to freight forwarder, Kuenhe + Nagel, transit cargo that could potentially end up in the market and affect prices and hurt the local market is rejected: 'For example, anti-retroviral drugs (RIVs) being sent to Zimbabwe for 4.8 million people required an actual import permit' (personal communication, March 2013). In other countries where the same relief organisation imports RIVs, the organisation may not have previously been required to obtain an import permit, so the permit, in this case, was specific to Zimbabwe. In another case, 'nearly USD1.8 million of polio vaccinations went to waste because they were not kept at the correct temperatures at the airport in Kabul' (personal communication, March 2013). This does not indicate corruption but may be misperceived if high volumes of vaccines intended for those in need go to waste. The organisation may not have known that obtaining clearances and organising special conditions was required on the front end because it was specific to the country of import.

If there is a negative perceived notion of dealings within a customs agency, some organisations do not ship relief consignments as they would to countries where this negative perception or the presence does not exist. Whether consciously or by accident, sending goods without the proper paperwork, or no local consignee, will increase the time it takes for Customs to inspect and approve the consignment.

This will reinforce the organisation's negative perception that customs officials are not working correctly when, in all likelihood, the goods could have been rejected because there was no local consignee or they are still sitting in a customs warehouse because they came without the proper paperwork. This would affect that organisation's perception of Customs. Without a local consignee, the goods, even if cleared and approved through the customs declaration, may sit at customs, because **no one picks them up for distribution**. This can easily translate into negative perception on the side of the international community when, in fact, it can be something as simple as the sender not having a local consignee.

## 2.9 Non-binding customs model agreement

Where there is a non-binding disaster law agreement on 'Customs Facilitation in Humanitarian Assistance' in place between the country and the UN, the country is a signatory to the WCO's Resolution of the Customs Co-operation Council on the Role of Customs in Natural Disaster Relief, the country has incorporated the International Disaster Response Laws (IDRL) Guidelines' specific provisions into their national legislation, or the country has ratified the Specific Annex J to the Revised Kyoto Convention, or the UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182, they have expressed the political willingness to implement simplified procedures in customs processing at the time of a disaster. This means encouraging the expeditious movement of relief consignments through Customs at a tax and duty exempt rate for humanitarian organisations and IOs. If one of these legal instruments has not yet been domestically incorporated because of a lack of political will or motivation, the time for customs approval remains high. According to Ms Virginie Bohl of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), all nine countries that have signed the Agreement on Customs Facilitation in Humanitarian Assistance have seen improvements in their ability to respond to disasters.

According to Mr Soontorncharoenwong from the Legal Bureau Office at the Thai Customs Department, the main challenge for the current system is the lack of regulations pertaining specifically to the clearance of relief items after disasters, outlining that the current framework in Thailand does not recognise disaster relief consignments as a specific type of consignment for which to expedite the customs clearance processes. 'The issue was highlighted after the 2011 floods in Thailand where organisations not recognised as governmental organisations or public charity organisations were not exempted from paying customs duties on donated relief goods' (WCO/OCHA/IFRC 2012a, p. 6). Thai Customs are currently working to amend the decree and make it more inclusive by adding a category, which waives

any ‘economic export prohibitions or restrictions on the importation of relief consignments, disaster relief personnel and their possessions’ (WCO/OCHA/IFRC 2012a, p. 6) because they see the relationship between implementing disaster law and/or emergency protocols and the ability to effectively respond to a disaster. The customs sections of the IDRL Guidelines ‘work with the national society of a country on analysis, recommendation and then implementation to simplify procedures with concern for the types of goods and equipment that should be exempt at the time of a disaster because these governmental bodies [are sometimes] not even in operation for quite some time after the disaster strikes’ (personal communication, May 2013).

### 3. Summary and recommendations

It may not come as a surprise that many humanitarian aid organisations that ship emergency goods are focusing their customs-clearing efforts on ad hoc policy negotiation through strategic relationships, changing legislation, and signing agreements, which will simplify procedures, improve capacity building, enhance training of local customs officials, and advocate the need for automating customs IT systems. These all are corrective actions that can create the balancing loops shown in Figure 1. Balancing loops can slow, arrest, or even reverse the reinforcing dynamics that work to increase delays and the time to approve shipments for clearance. However, there are also other ‘small wins’ that can be implemented locally.

The following comments relate, broadly, to the considerations above of the barriers to goods entering a disaster area, and point to the fact that to mitigate delays many aspects are interrelated.

- 3.1** One way to ensure productivity of local customs officials is to manage the amount of overtime that customs officials are allowed to work. While it is necessary for customs facilities to be open and in operation 24/7 during a disaster, working schedules need to be crafted to balance the workload amongst workers to ensure they are not experiencing the effects of fatigue that come with working too many overtime hours. In the case that work schedules cannot accommodate a 24/7 operation period, increasing the amount of effective workers by adding capacity can address the effect of fatigue on productivity. When workers are fatigued, productivity declines. When productivity declines, the time required for processing the backlog increases.
- 3.2** Another local policy action to reduce backlog is to organise human resource allocation and define working instructions dynamically between those who work on processing new consignments and those who process consignments that are under review and require additional paperwork, taxes to be paid, additional approvals, or clarification. By reviewing and dynamically adjusting human resource allocation, workers can decrease the time it takes to review, inspect, and get approval for relief consignments.
- 3.3** Minimising the time to verify paperwork and obtain ministry approvals will positively affect customs delay. Accelerating approvals and minimising verifications can be accomplished by improving and streamlining communications with all ministries involved, as well as by advancing the current communication media used to inform senders of imperfect paperwork or necessary taxes through an updated web-based platform, for example. Another way to reduce approval time is simply to require less paperwork. Conducting a review of necessary documents to streamline fields within those documents, and stamps and signatures required, will have a balancing effect on the reinforcing dynamics. This will, in turn, create overwhelming recordkeeping and confusion from multiple inquiries, which increases the time needed to track and respond. A positive example of this was the One-Stop-Shop instituted in all the Collection Districts of the Bureau of Customs by the Government of the Philippines where they posted the procedures for the expedited release of foreign donations in times of calamities on their website with links to it on Twitter to improve customs facilities in the Typhoon Yolanda response.

- 3.4** Another, more ambitious approach that local customs authorities can put in place is to automate the system of operation. UNCTAD's ASYCUDA software module is being implemented in more than 90 developing countries to automate and simplify country legislation for importation, to update IT infrastructure, and to provide a web-based system for importers so that trade can be more easily managed. UNOCHA has recently started a new initiative to partner with UNCTAD's team to create a new tool that will serve as a default module in the software system for times of disaster to simplify procedures, enhance inspection processes, and facilitate the relationship between customs entities, thereby improving the processing time. The program electronically notifies the ministries involved of the shipments to arrive that will need approval immediately after the sender enters the data and, at the same time, allows the ministries to make approvals online. If IOs that usually import relief consignments at times of disaster access the country's ASYCUDA website, they will be able to complete all necessary forms online and Customs will be notified of the shipment before it arrives so it can be approved in advance. Therefore, automation can offer phenomenal gains for reducing customs delay.
- 3.5** One way to address the lack of awareness for importation requirements is to encourage information sharing and awareness campaigns between customs agencies and IOs so that there is less room for miscommunication and errors in paperwork. UNOCHA provides a tool that aims to compile relevant customs data for emergency relief senders in an online directory, and the effectiveness of the information stored in the tool's database becomes a question of greater participation, information sharing, and awareness of the tool itself. Also, the Regional Seminars on the Role of Customs in Natural Disaster Relief that UNOCHA, the WCO, and the IFRC organise are critical for information sharing and to facilitate communication and awareness for member states to be aware of the instruments available to them, how they are used, and how they can improve the way that they work if adopted.
- 3.6** The IFRC and UNOCHA seek to inform and train customs officials on the critical value behind having a set of simplified, written procedures at the time of a disaster and the importance of working overtime. This means that IFRC and UNOCHA surmise the inefficiency and delay to be due, largely in part, to local customs officials' willingness to take additional measures to simplify processes at the time of a disaster. Additionally, they encourage capacity building of the local customs administrations by OCHA introducing the Customs Agreement, which aims to simplify existing procedures, to require fewer documents during times of disaster, and to make relief consignments and relief personnel equipment prioritised and tax exempt. This recommendation is corroborated by a comment from a regional seminar participant in the Bangkok, Thailand seminar who said, 'It would be worth having representations from Customs, NDMA and the Red Cross/Red Crescent from the same countries at one table to work through issues together' (WCO/OCHA/IFRC 2012a), thereby encouraging greater communication and awareness of policies in place.
- 3.7** Even if customs authorities have not implemented a specific set of emergency protocols or passed disaster legislation, IOs and governments sending relief materials should work through the local capacity rather than try to circumvent it because, according to an expert in freight forwarding 'it helps the country to build more capacity in their institutions if organisations go through the processes and the local structures deemed by [the actual] law and policies in place' (personal communication, March 2013). It is through adherence to actual law and policy in place that the challenges and inefficiencies become known and the argument for change has evidentiary backing.
- 3.8** Lastly, customs authorities can work to better motivate their employees by providing improved job security, better wages, and/or additional training. With a more motivated workforce, inefficiencies caused by a lack of motivation, such as cutting corners, can be reduced.

## 4. Conclusions

Any number or combination of these recommendations can help mitigate customs delays at the time of disaster by disrupting the reinforcing behaviours of the current system.

Approaching this problem of customs delays by looking at the system in its entirety and not just one individual actor within the system improves understanding of what variables are at the root of the problem in clearing relief consignments during times of disaster.

Describing the problem using unidirectional hypotheses as explanations of the problem is no longer sufficient. Remembering that customs delays can have an impact on the number of lives saved in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, the importance of reducing delays should not be dismissed.

The representative of the IDRL program stated that ‘Given these recent efforts, this problem is starting to get more international attention and be seen as an issue of relevance and importance to disaster response’ (personal communication, May 2013). Fortunately, this issue is gaining traction internationally so that ad hoc procedures and ‘fixes that fail’ can be put to rest. When all stakeholders increase dialogue, the chances of being on the same page and finding positive resolution to the difficult challenges of customs delays in international disaster response efforts improve.

In this world, multiple interests will always compete and cause systems to be imperfect, but hope must remain that in raising awareness, sharing information, implementing corrective actions where possible, and working together in a cohesive way will allow for the people affected and made vulnerable by disasters to be the common denominator at the forefront of organisational decisions and operations during an emergency response.

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## Note

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### Rebecca Turner



Rebecca Turner currently writes for the Humanitarian Practice Network and has previously written for submission to the Cambridge University Press on a publication with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Humanitarian Logistics during Complex Humanitarian Emergencies. She has been working as a Project Manager in Bogota, Colombia and previously as a Logistics Project Coordinator for the Emergency Response & Recovery Branch at the Centers for Disease Control in Haiti. Rebecca is currently an Adjunct Professor of Logistics at Emory University and previously received a Masters in Logistics and Management at Università della Svizzera Italiana in Lugano, Switzerland. Prior to receiving her Masters degree, Rebecca was an intern with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Geneva.

