Enabling Sustainable and Ready Regional Humanitarian Logistics in Southern Africa

Case Study

Introduction

Southern Africa is facing increasingly frequent and complex humanitarian emergencies, due to cyclones, floods, droughts, disease outbreaks, and other shocks that place significant pressure on national and regional response systems. As risks continue to evolve, there is growing recognition that effective humanitarian logistics management is essential to ensuring timely, coordinated, and efficient emergency response.

The Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Humanitarian and Emergency Operations Centre (SHOC) was established to strengthen regional preparedness, coordination, information management, and emergency response capabilities across Southern Africa. As a regional institution mandated by SADC Member States, SHOC plays a central role in advancing emergency preparedness, supporting emergency response teams, strengthening logistics systems, and enhancing regional cooperation.

In this interview, Director Anderson Banda reflects on SHOC's journey toward operationalization, highlighting the challenges encountered, the factors contributing to progress, the lessons learned through implementation and deployment, the outcomes expected from new systems and procedures, and the priorities that will shape SHOC and the humanitarian logistics ecosystem in the region moving forward. His reflections underscore the importance of partnerships, capacity strengthening, innovation, and environmental sustainability in building resilient humanitarian supply chains across Southern Africa.

The Challenges

According to Director Banda, one of the most significant challenges facing humanitarian logistics in Southern Africa is the increasing complexity of emergencies occurring alongside shrinking resources. The region continues to experience a wide range of natural and human-induced hazards, while the humanitarian sector is simultaneously grappling with reduced funding and growing operational demands. This combination has placed considerable pressure on preparedness and response systems across the region.

As SHOC worked to develop its Strategy, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and Emergency Response Team (ERT) mechanisms, a key concern was the fragmented nature of preparedness and response efforts. Director Banda explained that stakeholders operate within the same space, often with different systems, procedures, and resources. Consequently, SHOC's focus has been on strengthening collaboration, reducing fragmentation, improving resource sharing, and enhancing regional visibility of logistics capacities to support more coordinated responses.

Resource constraints also remain a persistent challenge. While financial limitations affect humanitarian operations, Director Banda emphasized that the issue extends beyond funding. The region faces shortages of specialized supply chain expertise, creating capacity gaps at both national and regional levels. Strengthening the technical competencies of personnel responsible for logistics functions is therefore critical to improving humanitarian outcomes.

Environmental sustainability presents an additional set of challenges. During the development of the SHOC supply chain SOPs, concerns emerged around poor waste management practices, the use of single-use packaging materials, and the continued reliance on imported relief items sourced from outside affected countries and the region. These practices contribute to increased waste generation and higher transport-related emissions. Director Banda noted that humanitarian actors are increasingly recognizing the need to incorporate environmental considerations into logistics planning and operations so that emergency response efforts do not unintentionally create adverse environmental impacts.

Timeline Highlights of Emergency Preparedness Activities in Southern Africa

January 2024 | Southern Africa Regional Roundtable (Malawi)
Identified priorities for stronger regional logistics coordination, including formation of a Regional Logistics Working Group, integration of environmental sustainability and harmonization of emergency preparedness and response policies.

April 2024 | Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week (HNPW)
Promoted dialogue on resilient and environmentally sustainable humanitarian supply chains.

June 2024 | East Africa Regional Roundtable (Kenya)
Explored challenges and opportunities for integrating environmental sustainability into preparedness and logistics operations and shared lessons learnt from Southern Africa.

January 2025 | Southern Africa Regional Logistics Working Group Established
Created a regional platform for coordination, knowledge sharing, and preparedness collaboration, including environmental sustainability expertise.

March 2025 | HNPW Sustainability Panel
Highlighted preparedness as a pathway to building more resilient and environmentally sustainable humanitarian supply chains.

August 2025 | SHOC Preparedness Project Launched
Brought stakeholders together to strengthen regional preparedness systems and define implementation priorities, such as capacity strengthening, prepositioning and environmental sustainability.

January-March 2026 | SADC Emergency Response Team Deployments
Supported flood responses in South Africa, Madagascar, and Mozambique while testing regional response mechanisms and collaboration among international teams and workstreams, such as environment sustainability.

January-June 2026 | Regional Pre-Positioning Strategy Developed
Stakeholder consultations were facilitated for the development of a long-term multi-sectoral regional plan to enhance availability of emergency supplies across Southern Africa, including green procurement measures.

January-June 2026 | SHOC Supply Chain SOPs Developed and Validated
Established harmonized regional procedures for preparedness and response, including environmental sustainability measures, endorsed by the SHOC Board.

June 2026 | Environmental Sustainability Training and TTX in Tanzania
Practiced preparedness and response procedures and strengthened understanding of environmentally sustainable logistics practices.

July 2026 | Regional Cyclone and Flood Simulation Exercise in Mozambique
Rehearsed coordination arrangements validated operating procedures, and improved regional response readiness.

The Success Factors

Reflecting on SHOC's progress, Director Banda identified strong political commitment from SADC Member States as one of the key drivers of success. He pointed to the significant number of Member States that have signed the SHOC Memorandum of Agreement as evidence of regional ownership and commitment to strengthening emergency preparedness and response systems. This political support has provided the foundation upon which SHOC has been established and is advancing its mandate.

Partnerships have also played a vital role in operationalizing the SHOC. Director Banda highlighted the contributions of the SADC Secretariat, the World Food Programme (WFP) country teams, the Logistics and Telecommunications Cluster team, consultants, and numerous humanitarian partners who have provided technical expertise and operational support. Through these collaborations, SHOC has developed strategic frameworks, validated its SOPs, conducted training initiatives, and strengthened regional coordination mechanisms. The Logistics and Telecommunications Cluster was recognized as a particularly valuable partner that has contributed technical expertise and remained actively engaged throughout the process.

Practical operational experience has further accelerated progress. The deployment of Emergency Response Teams during responses in Mozambique and Madagascar demonstrated how preparedness investments could be translated into operational action. These deployments enabled SHOC and partners to activate coordination mechanisms, mobilize expertise, utilize regional capacities, and support affected Member States during response operations. Such experiences have been instrumental in testing systems, reviewing procedures and strengthening preparedness arrangements across Member States.

Director Banda also identified simulation exercises and regional collaboration as important success factors. Exercises have helped stakeholders to validate procedures, identify gaps, and generate recommendations for strengthening future preparedness and response efforts. In addition, increasing engagement with the private sector has created opportunities to leverage technical expertise, innovation, and operational support that can further strengthen humanitarian logistics systems in Southern Africa.

The growing recognition of environmental sustainability within the humanitarian sector has also contributed to progress. As awareness of environmental impacts increases, sustainability considerations are beginning to inform logistics planning and operational decision-making, creating opportunities for more responsible and resilient humanitarian supply chains.

Lessons Learnt

Drawing on SHOC's experience, Director Banda emphasized that strengthening institutions and building effective systems requires time, ownership, and sustained commitment. One of the most important lessons learned has been that preparedness cannot be achieved through theoretical planning alone. Practical experience gained through training, simulations, deployments, and operational engagement is essential to building effective preparedness and response mechanisms. In his view, there are no shortcuts to building resilient institutions.

A second lesson concerns the importance of collaboration and shared responsibility. Director Banda observed that no single organization can effectively address humanitarian emergencies alone. Every institution within the ecosystem has a role to play, and success depends on collective action, strong partnerships, and coordinated decision-making across national and regional levels.

SHOC's experience has also reinforced the importance of monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning. Director Banda stressed that organizations must continually assess their performance, monitor progress, identify gaps, and use evidence to improve systems and approaches. Humanitarian emergency preparedness and response can only improve when stakeholders are willing to learn from both successes and setbacks.

The deployments of Emergency Response Teams in Madagascar and Mozambique generated particularly valuable lessons. The support to these countries highlighted the benefits of cross-functional teamwork, knowledge exchange, and collaboration among national regional and international actors. They demonstrated how diverse expertise can be brought together to support coordinated emergency operations and strengthen overall response effectiveness.

Another important lesson is that SOPs should be viewed as living documents. Director Banda emphasized that procedures must be tested through simulation exercises, operational deployments, and continuous learning processes. Testing and practising helps clarify roles and responsibilities, improve cross-border coordination, harmonize procedures, and strengthen resource-sharing arrangements across the region.

The importance of environmental sustainability also emerged as a critical lesson. Director Banda stressed that environmental sustainability should not be treated as a competing priority but rather as a core component of humanitarian logistics. Humanitarian actors must strive to meet urgent needs while minimizing environmental harm, making sustainability considerations an integral part of preparedness planning and operational implementation.

Finally, SHOC's experience has highlighted the need to plan for future risks rather than relying solely on historical disaster patterns. As climate and hazard profiles continue to evolve, preparedness systems must become more adaptive, anticipatory, and capable of responding despite the uncertainty.

Expected Outcomes

Looking ahead, Director Banda expects the implementation of SHOC's five-year strategy, SOPs, and regional pre-positioning strategy to strengthen emergency preparedness and response capabilities across Southern Africa. At the strategic level, he anticipates stronger regional cooperation, improved coordination among stakeholders, greater alignment of humanitarian logistics with resilience objectives, and increased support for national environmental sustainability policies.

He also expects greater participation from the private sector, increased innovation, and broader adoption of sustainable logistics practices. These developments are anticipated to contribute to more resilient humanitarian systems capable of responding to increasingly complex emergencies while reducing negative environmental impacts.

At the operational level, the SOPs provide a common framework for preparedness, coordination, and response. Director Banda expects this framework to improve consistency across Member States, strengthen cooperation among humanitarian actors, and promote more effective regional emergency responses. By establishing common standards and procedures, SHOC aims to improve readiness before disasters occur and enhance coordination during response operations.

The regional pre-positioning strategy is expected to increase the use of local and regional suppliers, as well as greener relief items, helping to reduce transport distances and environmental sustainability negative impacts and strengthen supply chain efficiency. Improvements in warehousing, stock visibility, inventory management, and information management are also expected to support better decision-making and resource allocation across the region.

From an environmental perspective, Director Banda anticipates increased awareness of sustainability responsibilities among logistics actors and stronger integration of environmental considerations within preparedness planning. Over time, these improvements are expected to contribute to both more sustainable logistics systems and more effective humanitarian outcomes.

Looking Ahead

As SHOC continues its journey toward becoming a fully operational and mature regional institution, Director Banda believes that strengthening national capacities should remain a top priority. He emphasized that strong regional systems are built upon robust national systems. Investments in national logistics structures, supply chain management systems, and preparedness capacities will therefore be essential to achieving long-term regional resilience.

Partnerships will continue to be central to SHOC's future success. Director Banda advocates for a systems-based approach that brings together governments, humanitarian organizations, the private sector, research institutions, and academia around shared priorities. He believes that maintaining strong coordination mechanisms and fostering peer-to-peer learning across Member States and other regions will strengthen regional preparedness and response capabilities.

Investment in people is another critical priority. Effective humanitarian supply chains depend on skilled and knowledgeable personnel. Therefore, Director Banda, highlighted the need to institutionalize logistics training, strengthen Emergency Response Team capacities, expand opportunities for professional development, and conduct regular simulation exercises that practice procedures safely, test readiness and improve operational performance.

Looking further ahead, he underscored the importance of anticipatory action. Future preparedness efforts must increasingly focus on forecasting, risk analysis, and forward-looking planning rather than reacting to emergencies. In this context, digital tools and information management systems will play a crucial role in improving decision-making, enhancing visibility, and supporting coordinated regional action. Existing platforms and emerging technologies offer opportunities to strengthen preparedness and improve response effectiveness throughout the region.

Director Banda also emphasized the importance of private sector engagement, innovation, research, and local and greener production. By leveraging technological advances, academic expertise, regional networks, and private sector capabilities, humanitarian stakeholders can develop stronger and more sustainable supply chains that enhance both preparedness and response operations.

Conclusion

Director Banda's reflections illustrate the significant progress that has been made in establishing SHOC as a regional mechanism for humanitarian emergency preparedness and response, while also highlighting the work that remains ahead. Although Southern Africa continues to face increasingly complex emergencies, the development of regional strategies, SOPs, Emergency Response Teams, simulation exercises, and coordination mechanisms has created a strong foundation for future preparedness and response efforts.

His experience underscores the importance of political commitment, strong partnerships, continuous learning, and regional collaboration in strengthening humanitarian logistics systems. It also highlights the growing need to fast-track and fully integrate environmental sustainability into humanitarian operations and to ensure that preparedness efforts are informed by future risks and emerging challenges.

Ultimately, Director Banda views emergency preparedness as a continuous journey rather than a destination. Through sustained investment in national capacities, regional cooperation, skilled personnel, innovation, and partnerships, SHOC and its stakeholders can continue building stronger, more coordinated, and more sustainable humanitarian logistics systems that save lives, protect livelihoods, safeguard the environment, and strengthen resilience across Southern Africa.