



FROM STANDARDS TO CONTEXT-BASED QUALITY IN HUMANITARIAN AID

VOICE-SPHERE EVENT



EVENT REPORT

WEDNESDAY 27 MARCH 2019

Key messages

- We need both quantitative and qualitative tools to ensure effectiveness and efficiency in humanitarian operations.
- Standards need to be regularly adapted in order to better respond to different humanitarian challenges.
- Multiple similar and overlapping assessments and audits are a challenge for NGOs. Donors could converge and consider using one single certification.
- Donors and implementers need to build a real partnership based on trust where challenges can be openly shared and addressed.
- Different contexts need to be taken into account when designing a humanitarian response.

Introduction

To launch the 4th edition of the Sphere Handbook, one of the most widely recognized tools for the delivery of a quality humanitarian response, VOICE and Sphere organised a lunch debate *"From standard to context-based quality"*. Hosted by Médecins du Monde at their Brussels headquarters, the debate focused on quality in the humanitarian sector.

Kathrin Schick, VOICE Director, moderated the panel. In her introductory remark, Kathrin stressed the importance of quality in the humanitarian sector and the central role of Sphere in translating principles and rights into practice.

Kathrin argued that quality needs to be present all along the project cycle management: from needs assessment, to programming, delivery of aid and monitoring. However, it is a challenge to balance the need for having minimum standards assuring the respect of humanitarian principles, fundamental rights and ethical values with the agility and flexibility required to adapt to the evolving needs of crisis-affected people and changing contexts.

Each of the four panellists made a presentation, underlining the interest of addressing the issue of quality from different perspectives (Network, NGO, donor and field).



Aninia Nadig

Policy and Practice Manager, Sphere



The launch of the Sphere Handbook 2018 also marked the 20th anniversary of the Sphere movement, established originally as a time-limited project and now a worldwide community that empowers practitioners in improving the quality and accountability of humanitarian assistance. In her intervention, Aninia presented the latest edition of the handbook and its novelties.

The Sphere Handbook is used for programming, delivering and evaluating humanitarian operations, for capacity-building, training and for research and advocacy. Regularly updated in order to better respond to the many different humanitarian challenges in a changing world, it does not, however, alter its rights-based foundations: people have the right to assistance, to life with dignity, to protection and security, and the right to fully participate in decisions related to their own recovery.

The new edition was released after the most inclusive consultation ever, which lasted for two years and was grounded in the expertise of a diverse community of humanitarian practitioners from around the world. The process consisted in online and in-person consultations, including the one with the VOICE “DRR to resilience” working group, and peer review groups, in which four main topics were discussed:

1. Evolving emergency contexts
2. How assistance is provided
3. Accountability
4. Localisation

All four of these are clearly reflected in the new Handbook. Sphere also strived to use easier language, which should facilitate translations into many languages – a key element of successful localisation. Moreover, Sphere has created new ways to access the Handbook online and through an App.

Aninia shared the Sphere definition of quality that is

the aim of the handbook. There are two elements in quality: the first is the process and technical standards for doing work well: effectiveness (impact), efficiency (timeliness and cost of response or service) and appropriateness (taking specific needs and contexts into account). It means measuring the outcomes of a humanitarian response against recognised mechanisms and/or standards. The second element is having good services provided to affected populations that suit their purpose and are appropriate.

The new Sphere Handbook overall structure did not change but it includes some novelties such as the integration of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) in the Handbook. Furthermore, there is a stronger focus on the role of local authorities and communities as actors of their own recovery, stronger guidance on context analysis and on different ways to deliver or enable assistance. On this last point, there is now particular focus on cash-based assistance as one particular response modality, next to services or in-kind support.

The standards are reformatted to better match users’ needs and context-based response:

- Standards are more consistently outcome-oriented
- Key action now include sub-actions and examples
- Key indicators now provide measurable aspects of progress to achieve the standard
- Guidance notes support actions and indicators with more information and links to related standards
- Better integration of foundation chapters and technical chapters.



New standards have also been developed, informed by recent practice and learning:

- A restructured Shelter and Settlement chapter, including security of tenure and explicitly considering long-term displacement, and environmental sustainability
- A new section on using cash-based assistance and supply chain management through markets
- A new standard on WASH in healthcare settings, highlighting the role of communities and facilities in disease outbreaks - which is a collaboration between WASH and Health chapter authors

- A new standard on sexual violence and clinical management of rape, highlighting the critical role of prevention, treatment and support
- A new standard on palliative care, reflecting
- changes in global demographics, protracted displacement and crisis settings and non-communicable disease prevalence
- The food security and nutrition chapter has been simplified and emphasizes interrelated food security and nutrition assessments, analysis and complementary programming.

The slides used by Aninia during her presentation can be found in the annex.

Mags Bird

Strategic Advisor at Mission East (member of EU-CORD)



Mission East, a Danish relief and development organisation that focuses on Middle East and Asia, was one of the first NGOs to undertake a comprehensive self-assessment and then get certified against the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS), which are now an integral part of the Sphere handbook.

Mags described quality as an appropriate and relevant response, which is effective and timely, with good resources management. Mission East has developed a quality commitment framework, that served as roadmap to the various standards that the organisation has committed to – including CHS, but also other technical standards, donor standards, etc.

Mags introduced the process of certification and its challenges and stated that adopting such a framework is not a simple and rapid decision but it is a long journey that takes effort and capacities. CHS sets out nine commitments that organisations and individuals involved in humanitarian response can use to improve the quality and effectiveness of the assistance they provide, verified by 62 indicators.

There is now a third-party certification agency, the Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative (HQAI) that offers three types of audit services:

- Benchmark: a diagnosis of the situation of an organisation with regards to the CHS;
- Verification: an assurance that an organisation is making demonstrated, continuous and measurable progress in applying the CHS;
- Certification: an assurance that an organisation meets the requirements specified in the CHS.

The Core Humanitarian Standard is cross-cutting, they are not only standards for programming but also for human resources, financial management, own resources. It is important to help donors understand the certification process, the investments organisations make to get certified and the changes they achieve. Donors should recognise it as an important certificate and try to converge, using it instead of asking for different assessments. For Mission East, it serves also as a tool for improving quality with partners in the South.



Nora Loozen

Head of the Humanitarian Aid Unit at the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs



From a donor perspective, quality means that the humanitarian action is well-defined, needs-based, principled, timely and effective. Nora highlighted that, however, it is difficult to assess quality.

The Belgium Government does not implement humanitarian actions but acts through partners meeting specific criteria. To have access to Belgium funding, NGOs need to have a Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) with the European Union Department for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO). ECHO has its own assessment with its partners and Belgium did not want to impose an additional one.

Belgium is in constant dialogue with NGOs, it wants to build a real partnership, not only in specific project proposals but it wants to know what are the actual challenges in the field. Real partnership takes time and means building trust.

For their policy as a donor, quality means to have a modern and flexible approach that facilitates processes and not make it harder for partners. It is

possible to improve the efficiency of humanitarian action through learning. The humanitarian system is evolving fast and knowledge management needs to be at the core of the process.

Belgium has recently implemented some key changes in its process. It moved from being an administrative-based and quantitative approach that required partners to fill out many forms, with very limited space for qualitative analysis, to a more inclusive approach taking into consideration inputs from field visits and colleagues from the embassies, giving a proper space for a more qualitative evaluation. The new template for assessment allows for a better picture of the results and a better evaluation of the organisation.

Belgium now also gives feedback to partner organisations and is supporting a new phase of this process: in the best case scenario, they would have an exchange with partner organisations and then follow-up on how they are implementing the feedback, increasing the dialogue with partners in order to increase the quality of aid together.

Gabriela Luz-Meillet

Humanitarian Programme Coordinator – Humanitarian Support Personnel (Global Humanitarian Team), Oxfam



Gabriela has a long experience working in crisis-affected countries. For her, quality means a well-designed intervention, aligned with the local situation, that respects the humanitarian standards and principles. During her intervention, she focused on the importance of Monitoring, Evaluation,

Accountability and Learning (MEAL) process and its implementation in the field. In particular, the speaker noted that there is a need to frame accountability differently: it needs to be designed more by communities. Referring to the example of the Ebola crisis response,



Gabriela noted that community engagement is very important and sometimes it can almost be considered as a separate intervention. Humanitarian actors need to be able to design a context-based response for different settings and provide a timely support when a crisis emerges.

Oxfam uses the Sphere handbook to develop its own standards and to train its staff. Oxfam has minimum standards in different sectors, they are based on many researches and publications that emerged over the years and have real time reviews. However, it is difficult to compare a conflict in Africa with a natural disaster in Asia, for example. Some trends help organisations to improve, such as learning reviews. Oxfam reviews usually last for one year and half, they hold the staff accountable and create humanitarian leadership. Reviews are useful to flag where the organisation is responding timely and it contributes to external learning.

There are, however, some challenges. It is hard to get community feedback. Gabriela questioned whether the humanitarian sector is creative enough to develop a community-based response in different cultural settings. In Myanmar for example, Oxfam tried to use a simple system of smiley/sad faces to ask the community some feedback but people did not recognise the faces as expressing appreciation or rejection. In other countries, the local community was afraid to give feedback.

Oxfam standards apply also to development work. Humanitarian actors need to have a framework already in the first week of the response. It is important to think about not only the immediate needs but the medium/long-term needs of the local population. It is necessary to operationalise the nexus from the beginning of the response but without delaying the intervention.

Q&A with the audience

After the panellists' interventions, through a Q&A session, the panellists had an interesting and frank exchange with the audience on how NGOs can use the

standards more effectively in their relations with donors, on how to have a more gender-sensitive response and how to work with the nexus.

Annex

PowerPoint presentation – 2018 Sphere handbook





THE 2018 HANDBOOK

BRUSSELS
27 MARCH 2019



Sphere: A global community

- Focal points in 50+ countries
- 90 listed Sphere trainers
- 100,000+ practitioners in at least 149 countries
- 30+ organizational members
- 70+ individual members



- Most use it to guide assessment, design, delivery and evaluation.
- Capacity-building and training run a close second.
- Other uses are policy development, negotiations, advocacy, and research.

HANDBOOK REVISION Consultations: Who contributed?

WHO CONTRIBUTED TO IN-PERSON CONSULTATIONS?
More than a third of all contributors represented national organisations and local institutions.

- 26% National NGOs
- 8% Local authorities
- 45% INGOs
- 8% UN agencies/AFRC/CRC
- 13% Other (Academia, Donors, independents, Media, private sector etc)

Humanitarian challenges in a changing world

- 65 million people forcibly displaced globally
- Increasing needs and a humanitarian sector tested to its limits
- Growing use of cash and markets in humanitarian action
- Increasing national and local ownership of response
- Growing humanitarian needs in urban settings
- Expanding and more diverse community of humanitarian actors
- Calls for enhanced accountability
- More complex and protracted humanitarian crises

The revision process and global engagement

CONSULTATIONS SNAPSHOT
The 2018 edition is grounded in the expertise of a diverse community of humanitarian practitioners from across the globe.

Year	In-person Consultations	Online Consultations	Peer Review Groups
2017	60 events, 40 countries, 450 organisations, 1,400 participants	4,500 comments, 188 organisations, 65 countries	500 experts
2018	300 Organisations, 650 Participants, 20 Countries		



HANDBOOK REVISION Consultations: Global reach



60 Consultations 1400 Participants 40 Countries

Quality in context

1. Doing work well.

In the humanitarian sector, this means **effectiveness** (impact), **efficiency** (timeliness and cost of a response or service) and **appropriateness** (taking account of needs and context) of elements of a humanitarian response. It requires **assessments** and **feedback** from stakeholders on what an agency is doing well and how it can **learn** how to do better. It means **measuring** outcomes against recognised mechanisms and/or standards.

2. Goods and services provided to affected populations that suit their purpose and are appropriate (e.g., food quality).



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HANDBOOK REVISION Consultations Topics discussed



Evolving emergency contexts
Urban, camp-based settings, protracted and complex crisis



How assistance is provided
Cash-based assistance, service delivery, in-kind assistance, technical assistance, and getting the right balance between them



Accountability
Integration of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS)



Localisation of standards and community engagement



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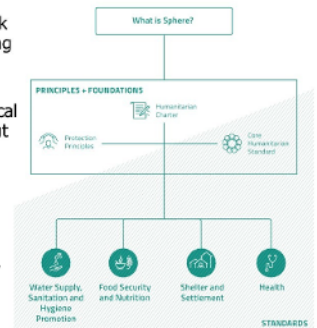
A holistic approach

Why? The Humanitarian Charter: The ethical and legal framework for humanitarian action, drawing on the RC/RC/NGO Code of Conduct (Annex 2)

How? Protection Principles: Practical expressions of the rights set out in the Humanitarian Charter

Core Humanitarian Standard: The framework for organisational responsibilities and accountability

What? Minimum standards in four life-saving sectors AND links to companion standards.



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NEW WAYS TO ACCESS THE HANDBOOK

The Interactive Handbook

- Launched and live in 4 languages
- Response design and mobile-ready
- Linked to the app with standards partners: multiple handbooks in multiple languages

And in 2019....

- User comments
- Curated evidence repository

Humanitarian Standards Partnership App

- Various available languages
- Planned: Cross-referencing and combined use



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A NEW ONLINE COURSE How to be a Sphere Champion



Learn how to promote Sphere within your network, and how this benefits the people you serve.

Anyone can be a Sphere Champion through their own actions and by encouraging those in power to take action.



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What is Sphere?

Assess current situation and needs over time

- Who is affected?
- Needs and vulnerabilities
- Capacity, resources and skills
- Contextual factors
- How are affected people protected?

Response and priorities

What systems need to be addressed? Is there a need for a new approach? Is what is being done? Do we have the standards?

Review options and decide how the response will be delivered

- Identify available options
- Identify potential barriers
- Review resources
- Identify funding opportunities
- Identify responsibilities

Design a programme built on quality and accountability

- Develop a plan
- Identify key activities
- Identify key resources
- Identify key risks
- Identify key partners
- Identify key indicators
- Identify key outputs
- Identify key outcomes
- Identify key impacts
- Identify key risks
- Identify key responsibilities
- Identify key resources
- Identify key risks
- Identify key partners
- Identify key indicators
- Identify key outputs
- Identify key outcomes
- Identify key impacts

- Context, operational settings, community engagement
- New flowchart: Understanding context to apply the standards
- Inclusion, data disaggregation table
- Delivering assistance through markets (Appendix)
- Summary of Code of Conduct

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The Sphere Handbook

Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response

What is Sphere?

PRINCIPLES + FOUNDATIONS

Humanitarian Charter

Protection Principles

Core Humanitarian Standard

STANDARDS

Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion

Food Security and Nutrition

Shelter and Settlement

Health

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Structure of a standard

Water supply standard 2.1: Access and water quantity

People have equitable and affordable access to a sufficient quantity of safe water to meet their drinking and domestic needs.

Key actions

- Identify the most appropriate groundwater or surface water sources, taking account of potential environmental impacts.

Key indicators

Average volume of water used for drinking and domestic hygiene per household

- Minimum of 15 litres per person per day
- Determine quantity based on context and phase of response.

Guidance notes

Water source selection should consider:

- availability, safety, proximity and sustainability of a sufficient quantity of water;

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Indicators

Process

Progress

Target

Yes / No

"There are no human faeces present in the which people live, learn and work"

Establish baseline & target. Measure

"Percentage of recipients who are satisfied with hygiene management materials and facilities"

Stated numerical target(s)

"Percentage of MAM cases with access to services (coverage)

>50% rural, >70% urban, >90% formal camps"

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