

Q&A Learning Event

Background note



10 October 2018, 2-5pm
3 Rue de Varembe, Geneva

In search of innovative contributions to address power imbalance in the humanitarian sector

Humanitarian standards can contribute to principled and pragmatic humanitarian practice and are an integral part of the humanitarian Q&A approach. Some standards help understand the context, identify needs, propose actions and review progress. But more fundamentally, they are based on rights, evidence and good humanitarian practice. All humanitarian standards take a people-centred approach, at times somewhat indirectly in the more technical standards.

The Grand Bargain's localisation discourse demonstrates a heightened international awareness of people's rights and respect of existing capacities, be that at national, local or communal level. For example, aid organisations' Grand Bargain commitments include a "participation revolution" aiming at "listening more and including beneficiaries¹ in decisions that affect them".

Quality and Accountability initiatives have produced standard handbooks and tools promoting this proposed way of working for the past 20 years. Today, the sector has adopted a holistic understanding of humanitarian accountability: *take into account* the needs, views and aspirations of communities, *give account* of how these have been reflected in the humanitarian response, and *be held to account* by the very communities that the response aims to assist.

But accountability also includes responding to staff, peer organisations and donors. Furthermore, humanitarian response occurs in often highly politicised contexts. Promoting rights and actively involving people is therefore not always easy. Humanitarian response still often misses meaningful inclusion of affected people in the decision-making process and takes an approach where communities have limited to no influence over the humanitarian response and specific intervention. To what extent do

¹ The word "beneficiary" expresses the notion of giving and receiving. We would prefer the term "affected populations"

organisations adapt their programmes, projects and organisational structures according to the needs and voices of communities?

One consultant for Sphere once stated: *“There is a tension between the participatory approach promoted and the sectoral responses implied by the structure of the Handbook: Doing things for people vs. doing things with people”*. The circle of involved actors with decision power often does not extend beyond the humanitarian field worker (except for consultations and feedback mechanisms).

Arguably, however, humanitarian standards – and in particular technical standards – are powerful tools for advocating rights – expressed in *human dignity* – even in highly politicised crisis situations. Standards could be embraced more to become common goods leading to a truly “common language” among all actors implied, along the entire power structure.

A lot has already happened that can be built on, shown by the numerous translations of Standards Handbooks, NGO and IA trainings and governments’ uptake of standards (NDMA, MoE, MoH etc). Also, the Core Humanitarian Standard is being promoted successfully and increasingly implemented by organisations and the UN.

What else could be done?

Key questions may be:

- How can Q&A initiatives address the oft-cited uneven distribution of power beyond consultation and feedback mechanisms?
- How can standards be communicated or transferred to communities, so they know their rights and can become their own advocates?
- Is local empowerment (of organisations and affected people) a zero-sum game or can it be win-win for all?
- How could Standards and Q&A initiatives communicate in an innovative way about their tools and their potential positive contribution to a meaningful localisation?

In the learning event, we will invite 3-4 brief interventions, followed by discussion. Sphere will produce a short public report of the event.