

# Empowering local actors and affected populations to be prepared, and during the response and recovery phase: how can humanitarian standards contribute?

IHSA Conference, 28 August 2018

## Panel Discussion: Participation and Accountability in Humanitarian Disaster Management

Centred on accountability and active participation of affected populations in humanitarian response, humanitarian standards translate universal rights into action. In doing so, do they contribute to empowering local actors and affected populations during the response and recovery phase? The presentation at the International Humanitarian Studies Association in the Hague, on 28 August 2018, depicted the major obstacles and best practices around this question, as examined by the Humanitarian Standards Partnership.

### The purpose of developing standards

The Sphere standards were developed in the late 1990s. While the Rwanda genocide played an important role as catalyzer, one key driver was to develop a quality control framework within the sector. Another important driver was the improvement of coordination and collaboration through clear technical guidance.

The responsibility of the state was recognized from the outset, and so was a people-centered approach. An extract from the 1997 Sphere project proposal states:

*“To elaborate technical standards [...] without any reference to the rights or aspirations of the assisted beneficiaries and claimants risks becoming a self-serving exercise concerned more with agencies’ accountability to donors than the rights of affected people. We therefore believe that any set of “industry” standards must first be prefaced by a set of “consumer rights”; a beneficiaries or claimants charter highlighting a person’s rights under existing international law and declarations”*

These rights are essentially the right to life with dignity and the right to protection and assistance, translated into process and technical standards.

Worldwide roll-out and strong focus on training, institutionalization and translations meant that localization was a strong focus from the outset. It contributed to the legitimization and global uptake of Sphere and to the development of subsequent standards handbooks.

## How standards define participation, accountability and empowerment

Participation and accountability are at the heart of humanitarian standards as logical components of the rights-based approach. The following few definitions support the subsequent argument of this paper.

Accountability is defined by Sphere 2011 as the responsible use by humanitarian agencies of the resources at their disposal. To achieve this, agencies need to

- explain how their programmes conform with best practice and commonly agreed commitments (for example, evidence-based standards accepted across the sector) by sharing results and reasons for action and non-action in a particular context in a transparent way;
- involve stakeholders in their work. With regard to affected populations, this means taking into account their needs, concerns and capacities at all stages of humanitarian response, respecting their right to be heard and to be involved in decisions affecting their lives, and providing them with the means to challenge agencies' decisions.

To achieve this, they must transparently explain the reasons for their actions (or non-actions) to affected populations, take into account their needs and give them the possibility to challenge their decisions (for the full definition please go to the Sphere Handbook Glossary 2011).

Participation means engaging the affected populations and local actors in all phases of a response, through a variety of forms or levels: information provision, direct involvement, consultations, partnership approaches, etc. Standards are developed in such a way that they can be implemented along different modalities and ways of engagement with affected populations. The choices will depend on the specific context and on the perspectives of those who want to engage with humanitarian agencies.

Power is the ability to act in a particular way, to influence events or the behaviour of others.

Agency is the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own free choices. It is also the capacity of exerting power.

In the context of humanitarian response, empowerment can be defined as a shift of agency, where the humanitarian relationship is not an unequal exchange between a giver and receiver (a relationship which is inherently disempowering) but an equal playing field ultimately leading to the transformation and equalisation of agency structures. Empowerment entails a shift of the nature of accountability towards local actors.

## Challenges to shifting agency during an emergency

In the context of humanitarian emergency, the risk of uneven agency-dynamics between humanitarians and crisis affected people is prevalent. Pressured by the necessity to respond rapidly and committed to efficiency, international humanitarian agencies face several obstacles to empower local actors and affected populations: they need to act fast, they lack resources or skills to identify, include and involve affected people to participate, they face language/cultural/ attitudinal/institutional barriers, and they have difficulty accessing local populations. Respondents are also tightly linked to donors, obliging them to deliver projects in a manner that is internationally accountable.

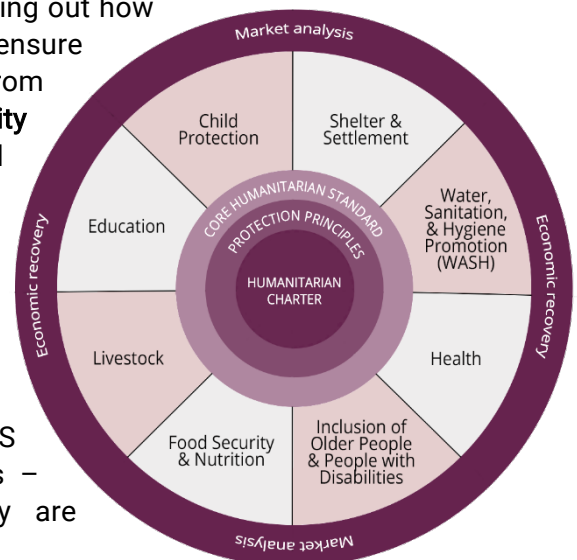
These factors lead to a situation in which humanitarian standards are often used in support of efficiency and effectiveness, despite undeniable efforts to embrace a people-centered approach.

There is increasing recognition that accountability and participation are difficult to attain without some degree of shifting agency towards local actors including all levels of government, communities and affected people themselves. Humanitarian standards can be used to support that shift.

## The Humanitarian Standards Partnership

The Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP) aims to improve the quality and accountability of humanitarian action through an increased application of humanitarian standards. It grew from Sphere's companionship model with other standards initiatives, which share the same foundations and right-based/evidence approach to developing standards: the Cash Learning Partnership's (CaLP) Minimum Standard for Market Analysis (MISMA), the Child Protection Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Action (CPMS), the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)'s Minimum Standards for Education, the Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS), the Minimum Economic Recovery Standards (MERS), and the Humanitarian Inclusion Standards for Older People and People with Disabilities (ADCAP).

The HSP standards are based on the **Humanitarian Charter**, the ethical and legal framework to humanitarian response, on the **Protection Principles**, setting out how to protect people from violence, avoid causing harm, ensure access to impartial assistance and assist with recovery from abuse, and on the **Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS)**, describing the essential elements of accountable, effective and high-quality humanitarian action. Furthermore, each handbook presents universal **technical Minimum Standards** for assistance in a specific area. All humanitarian response should work in a market-aware manner and have in mind economic recovery (see pie chart).



These three elements – the Humanitarian Charter; the CHS and Protection Principles; and the technical standards – constitute one coherent integrated framework. They are mutually reinforcing.

All standards are developed in a broad consultative, consensus-based manner and are regularly revised. Representing benchmarks of best practice in humanitarian action, they are meant to be used at all stages of the humanitarian response (preparedness, response, prevention, etc.). They guide humanitarians in their work and governments in their duties towards those affected by humanitarian crises. Standards are accessible as handbooks, online PDFs, and on mobile devices through a user-friendly smartphone application (the HSPapp).

Accessible in various formats (including in digital forms) and in simplified and abridged versions, standards have been translated into well over 50 languages over the past 20 years. They exist in different formats, adaptable to various cultural contexts. They are increasingly adopted by local actors and affected communities. The formulation of the standards itself allows local response and a recovery led by local actors (see for example various community engagements in WASH, Health and Shelter and support for national structures in nutrition and health). On top of that, the ADCAP standards provide guidance to identify and overcome barriers to participation (and access to assistance) for older people and people with disabilities. Standards promote self-help recovery strategies, including on livelihoods: MERS

and LEGS focus on economic recovery, markets and livelihoods, while CaLP's MISMA focus on market analysis and cash-based assistance.

The HSPapp has been downloaded in 184 countries. HSP standards are often contextualized (meaning adapted to local situations). As an example, the INEE MS have been used and contextualized in Afghanistan, Somalia, Vietnam South Sudan, Sri Lanka, OPT, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Bangladesh, Jordan, RDC and more recently in 2018, in Iraq.

## The impact of humanitarian standards

Because they are accessible and outline the rights people are entitled to during emergency situations, humanitarian standards allow affected communities to hold humanitarians accountable for their actions and claim their rights. This contributes to reversing the usual power dynamics and helps communities take ownership of the humanitarian agenda, instead of sporadically participating in externally-led humanitarian programmes.

Standards also allow communities to respond to crisis themselves and be accountable to their peers for their actions, as they often take place in remote or insecure areas. At the beginning of the Syria crisis many civilians trying to respond to issues in their community found CPMS and other standards on the internet and used them. Humanitarian standards give communities the agency to respond to crises in an accountable manner.

Standards provide opportunities for participation, cross-learning and information sharing. The LEGS Participatory Response Identification Matrix (PRIM) for instance is a tool that uses initial assessment findings to facilitate discussions with local stakeholders in order to identify which responses are most appropriate, feasible and timely.

The technical standards themselves are increasingly oriented towards community engagement, support of national structures, recovery and livelihoods. A number of the measurable indicators focus on outcomes and affected people's satisfaction with the response.

Furthermore, standards are becoming increasingly interactive. Sphere's upcoming interactive website will allow active exchange and collection of experiences. The work of Sphere and other HSP members with field partners plays a key role in adapting standards to local contexts, providing training, while also consolidating the input and demands of crisis-affected people. Many of these partners actively work with local governments, calling for the inclusion of standards in humanitarian response policies.

## Conclusion: The real shift may be in owning the standards

Humanitarian standards are written primarily for humanitarian practitioners and other actors in the field. They are not directly meant to be applied by affected people themselves. In other words, the ultimate beneficiaries of a standards-based humanitarian approach, the crisis-affected people and communities, are most often not the direct users of the standards. More thinking needs to be invested in making the connection between the use of standards and the impact of that use on beneficiaries.

But provided that there is long-term political and organizational will to shift agency, standards can be used to support local agency. Some national and local actors (in particular National Disaster Management Authorities, line ministries and NNGOs) have shown a keen interest in

working with internationally agreed standards from the beginning and are now gaining momentum and increased support in this endeavor.

Humanitarian standards have evolved to offer an increasing range of options to support national and local uptake. But they can go further in supporting local and national rights advocacy groups to increase affected populations' awareness of their rights and potential for agency and supporting national and local preparedness efforts based on standards. In any case, political will is key to making this shift towards increased local agency a reality.

*For more information on the HSP standards, please visit: <http://humanitarianstandardspartnership.org>*

