Engaging National Disaster Management Authorities

A guide for Sphere focal points and humanitarian advocates

Sphere

This Sphere thematic sheet (TS) explains how global humanitarian quality and accountability standards are relevant to national disaster responses. Its key learnings and messages are intended to help Sphere focal points and advocacy staff engaging with representatives of national disaster management authorities (NDMAs) on Sphere and other Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP) standards.

Engaging National Disaster Management Authorities on Global Humanitarian Standards

The Sphere Handbook recognises the primary role and responsibility of the host state... and the role that humanitarian organisations can play in supporting this responsibility.

(Sphere Handbook 2018, pp. 15,16)

Disasters offer an opportunity to implement existing humanitarian policies and encourage institutional and legislative change where necessary.

While national governments are responsible for the welfare of their citizens, humanitarian stakeholders – including community-based organisations (CBOs) and national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) along with bilateral-aid organisations and the United Nations – play a vital role in supporting governments in disaster response.

The Hyogo Framework for Action (2005) held governments accountable for providing predictable, coordinated disaster response. However, it also stressed the importance of institutional structures in disaster preparedness, response, recovery and reconstruction at national, regional and local levels. Several countries enacted legislation concerning disaster risk management and the number of officially recorded national platforms steadily increased over the following decade.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR, 2015) marked a clear shift in focus from disaster management towards an integrated and anticipatory disaster risk management. The SFDRR further emphasised the role of national platforms in strengthening disaster **risk** governance.

Role of NDMAs in the disaster management cycle

The state's role in leading or coordinating a response is shaped by many factors including whether or not there is a government body specifically charged with coordinating or implementing humanitarian response.

Such bodies are often referred to as **national disaster management authorities** (NDMAs).

An NDMA is responsible for laying down the policies and guidelines for timely and effective disaster management and response.

Varied NDMA structures are seen across the globe:

1. There may be a disaster management focal point. This is a coordination agency which has no implementation role.
2. Disaster management may be run in parallel with other line ministries in the government.
3. Existing implementing organisations may be used as the basis for disaster management.

SYMBOLS: ❯ see also ❶ example GN: Guidance Note KA: Key Action

The design and structure of an NDMA depends on both a country's risk profile and its capacity to adapt. National politics also often play an important role in disaster management, which is why countries sharing boundaries and natural hazard risk profiles can adopt different approaches to disaster management, and why disaster management approaches may be modified after a change in government.

NDMAs are mandated to take measures for disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness and capacity building. They must also procure relief materials. Close coordination and collaboration (at all levels) between the humanitarian community and the government help ensure risk measures are taken and a greater degree of preparedness achieved.

🛈 *A key agency needs to exist which has the authority and resources to coordinate all related bodies for disaster management such as ministries, international donors, NGOs and the private sector. Interworks (1998)*

How global humanitarian standards support national disaster response

The Sphere Handbook, which pioneered a rights-based approach for disaster response, consists of a set of common principles, rights and global standards that guide action in vital areas of humanitarian response.

The standards support local policy processes by emphasising the fundamental necessity to provide accountable assistance to help people survive, recover and rebuild their lives.

Sphere's principles and core beliefs are directly relevant to engaging with NDMAs:

- **The Humanitarian Charter** expresses the shared conviction of all humanitarian actors that "all people affected by crisis have a right to receive protection and assistance". It forms the cornerstone of Sphere as it ensures the basic conditions for life with dignity. The principles described in the Charter help national governments and humanitarian stakeholders reaffirm the primacy of the humanitarian imperative.[1]

- **The Protection Principles** translate the legal principles into actions that inform humanitarian response. The four principles support the rights set out in the Humanitarian Charter, emphasising that the state or other authorities hold legal responsibility for both the welfare of people within their territory or control and for the safety of civilians in armed conflict.

- **The Core Humanitarian Standard** presents nine commitments that describe the essential processes and organisational responsibilities for improving the quality and effectiveness of assistance. It supports greater accountability to communities and people affected by crisis, staff, donors, governments and other stakeholders in these commitments.

- In its **technical chapters** Sphere covers four key response sectors: water supply, sanitation and hygiene promotion (WASH); food security and nutrition; shelter and settlement; and health. Throughout, they seek to alleviate the disproportionate negative impact humanitarian crises have on vulnerable segments of society (children, older people and people with disabilities). They also look at measures to mitigate damage to agriculture, livestock, trade and other sources of livelihoods which impact on markets, and stall economic progress. They suggest ways to improve conditions in temporary settlements, and protect crisis-affected people's right to dignity, protection and rightful assistance.

Sphere provides the key guiding principles for humanitarian actors. However, over the last decade, other initiatives have led to the development of a set of complementary standards that all share a common philosophy and ethical basis. These are grouped together under the Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP),[2] whose aim is to improve the quality and accountability of humanitarian actions across all sectors and to provide a harmonised approach to support those applying the standards.

All these standards require active engagement with affected communities to ensure their meaningful participation in disaster response.

Global humanitarian standards are not supposed to be a binding set of rules but rather benchmarks to influence and inform the best humanitarian practices and their achievement. As noted in the Sphere Handbook's introduction, "The degree to which agencies can meet standards will depend on a range of factors, some of which are outside their control."

1   The humanitarian imperative is defined as the right to receive humanitarian assistance, and to offer it (Code of Conduct – see Sphere Handbook Annex 1). The Humanitarian Charter builds on it and states that "action should be taken to prevent or alleviate sufferings arising out of disaster and conflict".

2   http://humanitarianstandardspartnership.org/StandardList

The standards comprise:

- **Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action** (CPMS): The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action
- **Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards** (LEGS)
- **Minimum Economic Recovery Standards** (MERS): SEEP Network
- **Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies** (INEE): Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies
- **Minimum Standards for Market Analysis** (MISMA): Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP)
- **Humanitarian Inclusion Standards for Older People and People with Disabilities**: Age and Disability Consortium
- **Minimum Standards for Camp Management**: Global Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster
- **The Sphere Standards**

Built on the legal and ethical foundations of humanitarianism, and informed by evidence and experience, these standards provide practical solutions and showcase good practices that facilitate humanitarian engagements across the globe.

For both governments and humanitarian organisations, the standards offer an international reference point for a rights-based, predictable, coherent and accountable humanitarian response, by:

- **targeting** the population most in need of support (**needs-based** intervention);
- ensuring **protection** considerations, valuing the **dignity** of the affected population;
- fostering '**rights-based**' interventions;
- promoting **participation** at national and local levels;
- encouraging **localisation** – the enhancement of existing, local capacities;
- strengthening response **quality**;
- encouraging **accountability** (towards the affected populations);
- helping improve **coordination** of humanitarian stakeholders.

Adoption of global standards at a national level

Since the mid-2000s, several NDMAs have integrated global standards into their national disaster management policies and guidelines. This helps improve targeting and inclusion.

Adoption or adaptation of global humanitarian standards has also paved the way towards compliance with international commitments like the SFDRR.

In **India**, members of Sphere India, a national coalition of humanitarian agencies and government agencies such as the National Institute of Disaster Management (working under the Ministry of Home Affairs), contributed to the country's Disaster Management Act (2005). Sphere India also supported the participatory development of the NDMA's minimum standards for disaster response in the Indian context, complete with implementation guidelines.

In **Guatemala**, SE-CONRED, the Executive Secretariat of the National Coordinating Agency for Disaster Reduction, which was created in 1996 and is responsible for the coordination of cross-sectoral disaster relief efforts, has formally adopted Sphere standards and requires all requests for assistance to follow Sphere guidelines. In 2009, the Vice President of Guatemala was an honorary signatory to a memorandum of agreement on the use of Sphere and other standards in disaster response. This was key to establishing the role of Sphere standards in disaster relief in the country.

In **Indonesia**, Sphere and other humanitarian standards have been adopted in the National Professional Working Competence Standards on Disaster Management as well as the National Standards on Disaster Response.

In **Vietnam**, as part of the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) programme, formal contextualisation exercises were used to support the education response as part of disaster mitigation and preparedness. Contextualised standards were used to carry out government advocacy for strengthening a national law on preparedness and disaster response, to train school principals on school preparedness as well as to develop a school self-assessment tool.

In **Iraq**, a country at risk of both natural and human-induced hazards, the constructive attitude of the government as well as of international (humanitarian) stakeholders has led to the drafting of a distinctive law relating to disasters, and the creation of a robust, locally owned and locally led response capacity at all levels.

Adaptation of global standards at subnational (provincial or municipal) levels

NDMAs have subnational structures to cover provinces, governorates or states – the subnational divisions of the national authority.

Depending on the nature of the state (whether it is centralised or decentralised/federal), it may be more useful (in terms of achieving inclusive and predictable response planning) to approach subnational disaster management authorities rather than national ones. Below are two examples of this approach.

In **Argentina**, the NGO community led by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) encouraged local authorities to adopt Sphere across the country. In November 2019, a copy of Sphere 2018 was presented to the provincial authorities and humanitarian actors of the Argentine Republic in the presence of the Salta Provincial Government's Secretary for Civil Protection.

Pakistan's Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA) implements a combined approach of awareness-raising, focus on needs and sophisticated technical support for contextualising and adapting **humanitarian inclusion standards** to disaster response operations. This result is due to sustained, focused and well-informed advocacy. Interestingly, the NDMA refers to Sphere minimum standards in its national disaster management plan (NDMP) and directed provincial authorities to consider global standards in pre-disaster and response operations.

"In the (P)DMAs we put a process in place which started from the assessment of systems and policies followed up by action planning. Then, technical advisory groups reviewed their tools for initial needs assessment and data collection for at least a year, to fully integrate the knowledge obtained from the humanitarian inclusion standards. A practical example includes the physical accessibility of the office of the PDMA-KP for people with all types of disabilities."

Anwar Sadat, former inclusion advisor,
HelpAge International, Pakistan.

Israel developed a national protocol and policy for community-based emergency response. Sphere advocates have been supporting the process from the beginning. In these responses, needs assessments and response are well contextualised and at-risk groups are seen as a resource rather than mere recipients. This practical shift from "needs" to "assets" means that communities actively support their municipalities by providing solutions to the most vulnerable.

Adaptation of global standards at line ministry level

Different line ministries (water-sanitation, health, education, etc.) assess, analyse and address disasters in different ways, and with different structures linking national and municipal levels.

Global humanitarian standards help these various processes of institutionalisation become more aligned by proposing technical approaches based on the same logic of dignity and humanity.

This can be seen in the example of the Philippines, where the **Department of Health** has incorporated Sphere standards into its Pocket Emergency Tool (Department of Health, Republic of the Philippines, 2012).

In **Ethiopia**, LEGS is referred to in the National Guidelines (NG) for Livestock Relief Interventions in Pastoralist Areas of Ethiopia (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2008) and has been translated into practice.

In **Japan**, a developed country continually at risk of geophysical hazards, Sphere is referred to in the National Shelter Management Guidelines (NSMG) as a reference tool for improving the quality of shelters during disasters.

Adaptation of global standards to camp management and site planning during a displacement crisis

In some camp settings, local authorities and NDMAs will be in charge of administrative policy setting, coordination and management.

Even where global camp management standards were adapted to national or sub-national levels, there may still be gaps in the response. Any adaptation of indicators to context should be agreed by displaced people, host communities and organisations working in the site. Planning for displacement prior to an emergency should include the option of not setting up camps. In some cases, this would be in the best interest of the population.

In **Greece**, local government officials in transit hot-spot camps would informally verbally remind those from humanitarian organisations that the indicators for certain global spatial-planning standards had been met.

In **Cox's Bazar**, local government officials participating in workshops on safety observation audits would call on their staff to immediately fix individual (usually small-scale) instances of site planning problems (for example, a lack of handrails on bridges or stairways, or a lack of separate distribution centre entrances for women) that they discovered during their observational audits.

Key challenges in working with NDMAs

The level of success in agreeing and adopting global humanitarian standards at a national level varies, as does the process for achieving this.

Governments may not see global humanitarian standards as a priority, or they may have developed their own sets of standards and indicators.

Some additional obstacles to adopting and integrating global humanitarian standards are listed below.

Structural challenges

- **There is no overarching framework** that enables governmental and NGO stakeholders to collaborate. In some countries, a parallel internationally funded response system has developed (for example in the Democratic Republic of Congo).
- **There is a lack of operational capacity to communicate** consistently with national and international stakeholders. In some countries approaching disaster management authorities is difficult because they have neither dedicated capacity nor resources for coordinating with humanitarian actors.
- **A high turnover of NDMA staff** leads to disruption of discussion between the authorities and non-governmental stakeholders and to weak levels of engagement.
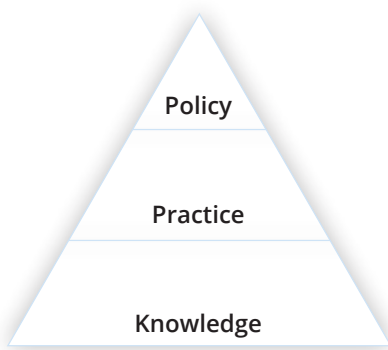
Non-structural challenges

- **Standards are not seen as useful**: They may not correspond to national objectives or situations, perhaps being considered too high (for underdeveloped economies) or too low (for developed countries). Governments may be keen to develop their own standards and indicators based on their specific national hazard profiles, and may therefore not consider global standards useful or relevant.

Common misconceptions about global humanitarian standards

They belong to international NGOs and the UN

They are intended only for the poorest developing countries

They create an imbalance between those receiving assistance and those who are not

They undermine existing development projects

- **There is an absence of political consensus** to support and sustain nationwide disaster management policies and practices. Such consensus is particularly difficult to achieve in countries where shifts in political direction after elections also influence the country's disaster management approach.
- **There is a lack of awareness** of global standards, so the standards might not be very familiar to all national governments and NDMA staff – for example in Kenya, neither the country's National Policy for Disaster Management (2009) nor the Ending Drought Emergencies Common Programme Framework (2015) make any reference to Sphere.

Hierarchy of levels of adoption of standards by local and national authorities[3]

- **Knowledge**: Staff are aware of the standards; dissemination is limited.
- **Practice**: Staff are aware of the standards and use them on their own initiative. Dissemination is wider, but the standards are not adopted across the board.
- **Policy**: Standards are adopted into local and national disaster management policy and incorporated in legislative frameworks. At this level, their use is no longer dependent on individual knowledge.

Key learnings: what worked in addressing these challenges?

- **Adopting a structured approach**: Acknowledging that the national and international humanitarian community supports national relief efforts helps to adopt a structured approach at all levels. The example of Zimbabwe suggests that for an NGO to engage with a government, it should start with a stakeholder analysis and a thorough understanding of the government's level of influence over disaster management. Joint assessments, planning and visits help mutual understanding and collaboration.

- **Building a cadre of focal points**: Sphere focal points are great advocates for standards and have often contributed to integrating their rights-based perspectives into disaster management policies and ensuring quality and accountability in responses (for example in Ecuador).
- **Choosing the right entry point**: The timing of post- and pre-disaster learning exercises and reviews is crucial for NDMA engagement. Experience has indicated that NDMAs that conducted reviews are more likely to adopt Sphere in their disaster management policies and procedures (for example, Pakistan, Indonesia and Japan).
- **Creating a space for dialogue**: Many of the previous points can help create a common language around shared goals in humanitarian disaster response. Standards help formulate these goals in a proactive, neutral manner (for example, Guatemala, Japan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India). Building dialogue requires a persistent presence, constructive collaboration and effective communication with officials, and where possible, with the general public about the impact of global standards (for example, Japan).

"Be there, be present, (in) personal and professional relationship with the government. Be ready with experiences, expertise, network and resources. Ensure communication, collaboration and partnerships at field level."

Dr. H. Iskander Leman, co-founder of MPBI, Indonesia, speaking in the Sphere webinar Working with NDMAs – Challenges and Best Practices, 14th July 2021.

- **Contextualisation of humanitarian standards**
  "Contextualisation is the process of taking into consideration the local situation in order to interpret existing standards and adapt indicators for meaningful application. Contextualisation makes humanitarian assistance more effective and helps practitioners maximise opportunities and minimise errors".[4]

  Tailoring global documents to address local situations and chronic needs is seen as essential for enabling the adoption of standards in national disaster management policies. As highlighted in the LEGS Discussion Paper on Institutionalisation,[5] contextualisation of training material, support for local action planning and decentralisation of training and trainers all help ownership and sustainability.

3   Adapted from Giles et al., 2019.

4   Sphere, working with universal standards in local contexts, 16 September 2016. Available at https://www.spherestandards.org/working-with-universal-standards-in-local-contexts/
5   Featherstone: Putting the right foot forward.

In Indonesia, the Sphere standards were translated into Bahasa Indonesia. But for the government to take full ownership of the standards, a formal, inclusive process of institutionalisation would be beneficial.

- **Institutionalisation of standards through training and capacity building**: Conducting systematic trainings on Sphere and other global humanitarian standards for government officials (as in Argentina, the Philippines and Guatemala) makes them aware of the principles and practices of a rights-based and needs-responsive approach across all sectors and phases of disaster management. The Guatemalan Sphere network developed tools for tracking training and capacity building activities because trainings need to be followed up, so that the outcomes are locally owned and knowledge transfer can be effectively sustained.

  The humanitarian community can also be encouraged to give continuous training to their own staff, to improve understanding of global standards.

- **Translation**: NDMAs engage better in their own language. Translating Sphere standards into local languages (as in Japan and Indonesia) is always helpful.

- **Engaging with academia** provides an avenue for increasing knowledge and use of global standards (as in Bangladesh and Pakistan). Inclusion of global standards in tertiary education, through curricula and practical workshops, has great potential to increase recognition and knowledge of the standards among aspiring decision makers and future government officials.

With these kinds of approaches, Sphere and HSP focal points and advocates can:

- **support the strengthening of disaster management**. A well-defined institutional structurecan facilitate the coordination between the government and non-governmental stakeholders. The institutional structure should be such that it supports decentralisation and establishes links with non-government actors and international donors.

- **support the creation of dedicated capacity for coordination**. Adequate financial and human resources and appropriate coordination management bring coherence and predictability to humanitarian operations. Coordination can also be achieved through international support structures such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Clusters or else regional structures.

- **suggest conducting capacity audits**. Given the presence of multiple governmental line departments to deal with disasters, an organisational capacity audit helps identify any inherent strengths and weaknesses in the perception of, and strategies for, addressing risks. A detailed capacity building calendar, coupled with an action plan, ensures that learnings are applied to areas where changes are being introduced (as in Pakistan).

Key advocacy messages

As a civil society actor (for example, a Sphere focal point), you will need to have a thorough understanding of the processes and actors involved in disaster management (including UN agencies, which have the potential to be useful advocacy partners).

Strengthening local NGO partnerships is important. Some countries have seen the emergence of Sphere groups, for example, which may include representatives of NDMAs.[6] When engaging with NDMA representatives, it may also be worth seeking examples of successful processes from neighbouring and regional countries or from countries with which your country has a strong relationship.[7]

Sustained, collective and evidence-based advocacy is important for promoting global humanitarian standards, engaging meaningfully with NDMAs and ensuring coherence and accountability in disaster management.

There are two key messages for NDMAs:

1. Global humanitarian standards provide NDMAs with an integrated approach and detailed steps for ensuring a rights-based, quality humanitarian response in line with globally agreed values and outcomes. They provide a common language for national actors at all levels, and for international actors supporting national disaster management.

2. Everyone has the same right to life with dignity. The circumstances standing in the way of people enjoying this right vary for different population groups. Global standards allow the formulation of targeted, needs-based disaster management.

6   See spherestandards.org/focal-points/ (Examples are Bangladesh, Bolivia, Honduras and India.)
7   Sphere standards in national humanitarian response: Engaging with National Disaster Management Authorities – A discussion paper (2016)

Here are some ideas to help achieve these objectives:

Synergise: Develop and improve synergies among agencies to achieve coherent and coordinated action. This will facilitate the adoption of global standards at national and local levels.

❗ *Message: Global standards help you develop an integrated approach at a national level. They help you communicate and collaborate with non-state actors who are supporting you in this endeavour.*

Integrate: Climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction must be integrated at national and local levels in coordination with non-government stakeholders. Sphere and other standards have responded to this need by providing integrated guidance.

❗ *Message: Sphere will help you work towards limiting people's exposure to disaster risks and the impacts of climate change.*

▶ *See https://spherestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/ Sphere-ThematicSheet-DRR-EN.pdf and https://spherestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/ Sphere-thematic-sheet-environment-EN.pdf.*

Leverage: Policy reforms towards predictable disaster response, participatory recovery, and risk reduction planning depend in part on political will and administrative reach.

❗ *Message: Good disaster governance is the result of a collective commitment by political and bureaucratic actors to undertake coherent actions that help achieve a set of objectives for the greater common good. Humanitarian standards provide the common language for this collective commitment.*

Customise: Global standards for quality and accountability can complement and strengthen existing disaster management plans through improved targeting based on needs.

❗ *Message: There is no need to completely change your approach; global humanitarian standards are here to support and strengthen it instead.*

Cover a wider realm: Global standards for quality and accountability can address natural hazards as well as protracted complex emergencies (supporting preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery).

❗ *Message: Global humanitarian standards will facilitate your interventions in all phases of disaster management.*

Shift of focus: While post-disaster relief restores lost assets, longer-term disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation help reduce the human and economic impact of disasters.

❗ *Message: There is a need to shift focus from supporting post-disaster relief to addressing the underlying causes of disaster. By identifying the most basic and pressing humanitarian needs in four life-saving sectors, the Sphere standards help address underlying causes early on.*

Build capacities, continually: Consistent training on the significance of global standards, followed by mentoring support for the translation of principles into practice, will help tackle the knowledge drain caused by high staff turnover.

❗ *Message: Invest in capacity building around global standards as a continuous activity.*

Create a link between training and practice: Highlight community-level work and its compliance with global standards to support evidence-based advocacy. There is already consistent donor support for incorporating global humanitarian standards into the design and approval stage of programmes – make sure you fully benefit from it.

❗ *Message: NDMA policies should be linked to evidence-based practices on the ground.*
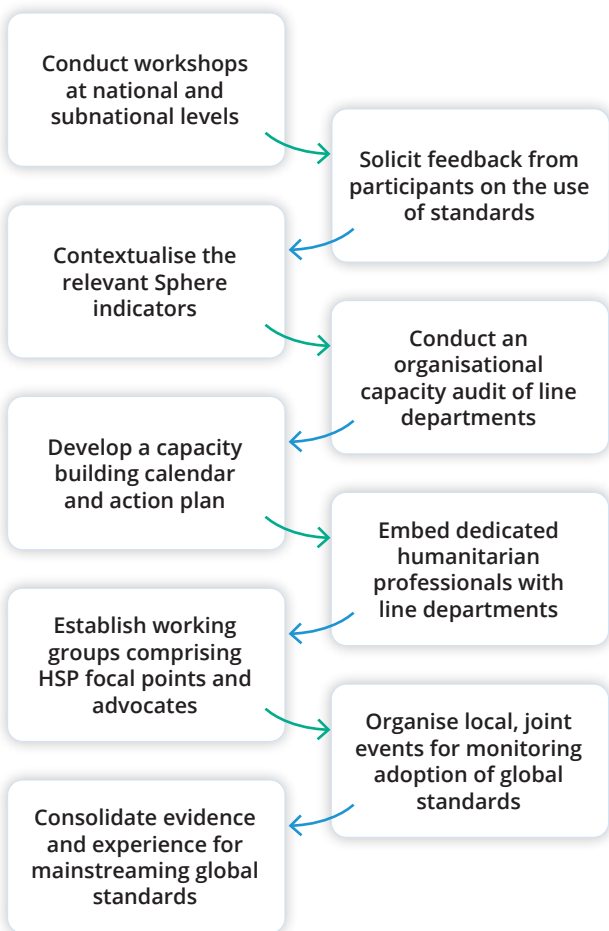
Global humanitarian standards are a decision support tool: They are useful in any phase of the disaster management cycle, and are ideal for enhancing the effectiveness, quality and accountability of humanitarian response.

❗ *Message: Sphere and other global humanitarian standards outline the key ethical and practical areas of intervention which NDMAs should focus on.*

DIY kit for facilitating localisation of global humanitarian standards

This do-it-yourself kit suggests a concrete way to engage authorities in an exercise in institutionalising humanitarian standards. This is a highly participative process which should support the acceptance of global standards at local level and a solid rights-based humanitarian response. To see how it works, also consult the "Sphere for NDMA" training module.

Conduct workshops at national and subnational levels

Solicit feedback from participants on the use of standards

Contextualise the relevant Sphere indicators

Conduct an organisational capacity audit of line departments

Develop a capacity building calendar and action plan

Embed dedicated humanitarian professionals with line departments

Establish working groups comprising HSP focal points and advocates

Organise local, joint events for monitoring adoption of global standards

Consolidate evidence and experience for mainstreaming global standards

This Thematic Sheet was developed by Prasad Sevekari. Sphere would also like to thank the Sphere community for their valuable comments and for contributing case studies.

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