

The Sphere project and handbook

Accountability lies at the heart of the Sphere project, an initiative taken by a number of humanitarian NGOs along with the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies.

The Sphere project was launched in 1997 with the aim of improving humanitarian agencies' accountability to their donors and beneficiaries. It commits NGOs to a set of principles and minimum standards that crisis-hit communities have the right to expect.

These rights-based principles and standards for disaster response, developed by over 400 organisations in 80 countries, are contained in Sphere's *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response* handbook. The principles are based on international humanitarian and human rights law, refugee law and the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief*.

The importance of taking special measures to ensure that children are given protection and assistance is highlighted as an issue that has an impact in every emergency. Children often experience the most harmful effects of emergencies. The handbook therefore stipulates that children's particular views and experiences should be taken into account whatever the situation, whether it be emergency assessments, humanitarian delivery, or monitoring and evaluation.

The Humanitarian Charter

The Humanitarian Charter emphasises that the primary responsibility for guaranteeing the right to protection and assistance in emergencies falls to States. Should States be unable or unwilling to provide such assistance, they are obliged to allow humanitarian organisations to provide this.

The Charter outlines the core principles for humanitarian action in situations of armed conflict and natural disasters. These include the right to life with dignity; the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, as stated in the Geneva Convention of 1949 and its Additional Protocols of 1977; and the principle of non-refoulement – the right of refugees not to be sent back to a country where their lives or freedoms are in danger.

Minimum Standards

The Minimum Standards aim to shape humanitarian action in five key sectors. Each standard has technical indicators to measure how that standard has been fulfilled.

The five key sectors covered in standards and technical support include:

- **water supply, sanitation and hygiene promotion:** waste disposal, drainage
- **nutrition:** food security and nutrition standards, assessment standards. Nutrition and food security are a practical expression of the right to food, whereas the food aid standards are more operationally focused
- **food aid:** planning, distribution and management
- **shelter, settlement and non-food items:** the return to and repair of damaged accommodation, temporary planned or self-settled camps
- **health services:** systems and infrastructure, control of communicable and non-communicable diseases.

The handbook's guidance notes include advice on practical dilemmas and gaps in knowledge. All these areas are interrelated, and it is recommended that each chapter should be read in the light of the handbook as a whole.

The first Sphere handbook was published in 2000. The latest edition, published in 2004, covers recent technological developments and feedback from agencies that have used the earlier version. It also includes food security as a sixth, additional sector, describing a situation where people live free from fear of hunger or starvation. A further chapter has been included on common process standards that are relevant to each of the technical standards. These include participation, initial assessment, response, targeting, monitoring, evaluation, aid worker competencies and responsibilities, and the supervision, management and support of personnel.

The handbook can be downloaded from <http://www.sphereproject.org>

The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership – International (HAP-I)

The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership – International (HAP-I) was born as a self-regulatory body to improve humanitarian agencies' accountability to their beneficiaries. Following extensive consultation, HAP-I has developed a Standard for informing and consulting disaster-affected populations through a set of principles and performance benchmarks that agencies voluntarily sign up to. HAP-I also manages an ongoing process of research and consultation which works to develop and maintain principles and standards of accountability, and to support humanitarian agencies in complying with these.

HAP-I was established in 2003 by a small group of agencies to implement the lessons learned from its predecessors, the Humanitarian Ombudsman Project and the Humanitarian Accountability Project, among other quality and accountability initiatives. HAP-I currently has 14 full members.

HAP-I is one of several moves taken in response to an evaluation of the international response to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. This sparked discussions about the humanitarian community's lack of accountability to their beneficiaries generally. Humanitarian actors have considerable power to make decisions that affect the lives of large numbers of very powerless people. But this power can be exercised poorly or – even worse – misused (as in the case of the widespread sexual abuse of women and girls by UN peacekeepers and other humanitarian actors). HAPI, through its principles and standards, seeks to ensure that humanitarian agencies use their power responsibly.

Other initiatives which came out of the evaluation include the Sphere Project and the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP).

Organisations which join HAP-I must demonstrate that they meet the following performance benchmarks:

1. Establishing a humanitarian quality management system
2. Transparency
3. Enabling representatives of beneficiaries to participate in programme decisions
4. Evaluating and improving the competencies of staff
5. Implementing accessible and safe complaints handling procedures
6. Making continual improvements in their humanitarian quality management system

Under each benchmark, the Standard defines requirements that must be met by the agency, with suggested means for verification of each.

For more information about HAP-I, visit:
<http://www.hapinternational.org>