Quality and Accountability:
It is not enough to do the things right, the right things have to be done

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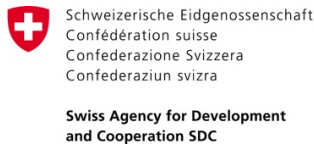
The Sphere Project

Notes from the panel discussion organized by CHS Alliance, the Sphere Project & Groupe URD, an event sponsored by Switzerland and Denmark

Arno Wicki, Deputy Head of Swiss Humanitarian Aid and SHA, Head of Multilateral Division

Arno Wicki introduced the discussion, asking "How can we do the right things and do them well?"

Though it seems obvious doing it is not trivial, especially if we also want to ensure people have a voice. From a donor perspective, the question is "how can we make the most out of the limited resources we have?" Well, our opinion is that with standards and quality, we can put people at the centre while at the same time being more effective.

Stephan Schønemann, Director for Humanitarian Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark

The report of the Secretary General "One Humanity: Shared Responsibility" highlights the challenges that political actors, donors, development and humanitarian organizations are facing and will have to deal with in the coming years: we all have to do more and better with constrained resources! This calls for a renewed commitment towards enhancing the quality, accountability and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance.

The progress made in advocating for putting people at the centre of humanitarian action is significant. Yet the challenge of translating this into meaningful policy, practice, and a consistently applied approach to consultation, participation, local leadership, assessment, monitoring, and reporting by all humanitarian actors remains a deep challenge.

With the attempt to raise the bar and setting the standard, a new quality and accountability tool - the Core Humanitarian Standard - was launched 1 ½ years ago in Copenhagen. The Standard places people affected by crisis at the centre of humanitarian action, and it 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.

[Shows the CHS] This little booklet is the fruit of many years of hard work - and it brings together the main elements of the Sphere Core Standards, the HAP standard, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Code of Conduct, the People in Aid Code of Good Practice and criteria from the OECD's DAC and from the Quality Compass developed by Groupe URD. The key stakeholders of this common standard are Groupe URD, Sphere and CHS Alliance.

It is worth complimenting these organisations and networks for their amazing efforts in joining forces and creating one Core Humanitarian Standard rather that a series of many. Together they are building a complementary approach that contributes to harmonising and strengthening the coherence of standards. Strengthening the coherence of standards across different sectors of humanitarian work on the basis of shared fundamental values, common structure and consistent language ensures greater ownership and enables increased effectiveness and efficiency.

With the recent adoption of the Core Humanitarian Standard by the Global Clusters to complement existing international technical standards, and with the support this common standard has garnered as a baseline for organizational accountability from NGOs to actors such as the European Commission, we have a real opportunity to strengthen a framework which puts people at the center of humanitarian action.

This opportunity has already been used to translate our common understanding of recognized standards such as Sphere and the CHS into institutional commitments and actions at the level of Humanitarian Response Plans. This has been the case in the response plans of Somalia, Afghanistan, Niger and DRC amongst others.

When response plans, common priorities and collective goals are informed by evidence and analysis against internationally recognized standards – significant shifts

in practice can be seen. To make this happen requires strong leadership at country level.

[Historical perspective]

These initiatives illustrate that for more than 20 years, the humanitarian sector has gradually been improving its practices through the development and dissemination of a myriad of quality and accountability initiatives and self-regulatory tools. Humanitarian organisations have gone through an enormous professionalization process, while trying to adapt to various code of conducts, common standards, good practices, evaluation mechanisms and learning networks. We have at large seen a great improvement in the logistical, financial and managerial systems of organisations. Their administrative controls have also increased in order to respond to growing requests from donors and public opinion about transparency and accountability. And the evaluation of response is now well accepted and established. This is all good. However, the quality of humanitarian aid from the perspective of beneficiaries, local authorities and media, is regularly questioned. A series of challenges are still ahead of us and we can ask ourselves these questions:

1. How do we maintain quality and accountability while adapting responses to new and increasingly complex and fast-changing situations, which at the same time require us to innovate, take risks, and accelerate learning?
2. How do we make sure that affected communities are put at the center, which means investing in local capacities so that international actors support national mechanisms rather than replace them?
3. How do we pass from an individual responsibility to a collective one, which means a shift from coordinating inputs to achieving outcomes together?

And how do we quickly transition from short-term crisis assistance to support for collective outcomes in protracted emergencies, which enable recovery with dignity?

The purpose of today's side event is to explore how we can address some of the challenges just mentioned - and to discuss how quality and accountability can increase the effectiveness and efficiency of aid. My Swiss colleague Arno Wicky, Deputy Head of Swiss Humanitarian Aid and Head of Multilateral Division, will guide you through this afternoon's discussions, which I hope will inspire us all to not only do things right but to ensure that it is the right things that we are actually doing! Thank you all for listening!

Amina Labarakwe, Community member, Baringo County Kenya

(translation into English provided by Ruth Obwaya, ActionAid Kenya)

My name is Amina. I'm a member of Churo division in Baringo country, Kenya.

Today, I'm here to talk about Quality and Accountability in the context of disaster.

With the drought that took place in 2011, we had challenges as women to walk long distances to feed children. There were inadequate health services, and men went away in search of pastures for their livestock. Many organizations responded and supported us at this time. My understanding of Q&A is a process through which policy makers account for what they're supposed to do or have committed to do. In my community, I was a representative of a vigilance committee, which through its work was the eyes of the community. This is one way we help to hold organisations to account.

Another one is involvement in decision making process. For example, we were involved in procurement process to award contracts, which helped to improve transparency. Accountability is a bottom up process. It needs to involve community members, because we are key in responding to disasters. I have also learnt that women leadership is key in any response efforts.

My message today is that the current accountability model where we are more concerned with the donors does not work for communities; rather what we should have is accountability towards both the community and the donors. Thank you for responding with solidarity.

Alejandro Maldonado Executive secretary, CONRED, Guatemala

From the point of view of governments, looking at standards is slightly different. As a government, we believe in the importance of standards, especially

Sphere, because it helps us better meet the needs of our population. It is however also important for accountability and transparency purposes. Standards are an important tool in the fight against corruption, which is a big issue in Central America.

In Oct. 2009, the Government of Guatemala committed in writing to comply with the Sphere Standards. We worked towards this goal by developing manuals and protocols to implement this commitment. For example, we developed Terms of Reference for procurement activities and purchases, setting clear rules for example for the bidding process. We also worked with our providers so that they meet the standards in terms of what they produce, in order to better meet the needs of end users, depending on their own context and culture.

Standards are also very useful insofar as they help quantify the amount of assistance that ought to be provided in an emergency. In relation to that, it also allows us to plan for future events and decide what should be put in a warehouse. Very importantly as well, standards help to minimise the human factor and support objective decisions vs. arbitrarily deciding what goes where.

Standards also push us to improve, even when it means fighting with our own legislation. We changed our approach in terms of what kind of mattresses were provided to people affected by crisis based on the standard, even though it wasn't easy to achieve.

Standards are indispensable tools for a better response. They help to better prepare our response, allow to reduce the time needed to respond, and are important for our accountability and transparency.

Lise Grande, Resident Humanitarian Coordinator, Iraq

We'd like to make three key points about the accountability agenda:

First, we want to acknowledge how important this agenda is and to celebrate the huge progress that has been made in the past several years to bring more and more attention to our collective responsibilities.

Second, we'd like to reflect on the concrete steps we can take at the ground level to ensure that the accountability agenda is put right at the centre of our collective efforts.

Thirdly, we'd like to reflect gently on some of the key threats to the accountability agenda. When we're told to do more with less, well, that's a threat to the accountability agenda.

When we think back on where we were ten years ago in terms of accountability and where we are now--it's incredible to see the progress. Ten years ago, everyone knew more needed to be done to ensure we were accountable to the populations we were serving, but there was drift--some might even characterize it as outright avoidance. We would say--the Sphere standards are great but we don't have enough money to fund them, we don't have tools to ensure the operational cycle has integrity; conditions in the field are too restrictive, donors won't pay, our coordination architecture isn't designed for this, and so forth. When (in Sudan, in the 90s) we actually asked populations what they needed, people said "We don't want plastic buckets, we want cash" and of course we would ignore that. Accountability was recognised as something aspirational but the lack of an agreed approach gave us an alibi, allowing us to avoid really having to do anything serious about it.

This has all changed. Because of the efforts of many organisations and members states and people, the accountability agenda is moving. One of the best examples of this are the nine commitments which make up the Core Humanitarian Standard. These commitments are a manifesto of how we should be working, and it's great it features in the Grand Bargain. The Standard is a very clear statement that humanitarians must see accountability to the people we serve as our fundamental responsibility--something all of us are obliged to do. The Standard is a way of concretising our ethical commitment and putting it literally at the centre of everything we try to do. As the Bargain gains traction, many of us will be working to ensuring this happens-- so that we don't have to look back in 10 years saying we tried, but unfortunately failed.

Our second point is about implementing the Core Humanitarian Standard into our humanitarian operations--Alejandro has spoken about how Governments are doing this, Amina has spoken about how community-based organisations are doing this and I'd like to reflect on how the cluster system and Humanitarian Country Teams can do this.

We'd like to suggest that there are at least four ways in which Humanitarian Country Teams can take the CHS and really make it work.

First, we can insist that all organisations wishing to submit projects to a Humanitarian Response Plan show that they are working to reach Sphere standards and the quality criteria in the Core Humanitarian Standard. A dashboard can be used to do this.

Second, we can insist that all clusters develop work plans based on the Core Humanitarian Standard cycle and that all clusters are working to deliver assistance at Sphere standards. The HCT can collectively review these work plans to ensure full support for them across the operation.

Third, we can insist that only organisations which are working to reach Sphere standards and the quality criteria in the CHS are eligible to seek funds from the in-country pooled fund and from the CERF.

Fourth, we can insist that HCTs conduct biannual strategic reviews of their operations to monitor collective progress against the CHS and Sphere standards. If we do just these four things, this will put accountability at the very centre of our collective efforts.

Making sure that all Humanitarian Country Teams do these four things requires two steps: First, the IASC

needs to change the terms of reference for Humanitarian Coordinators to include direct responsibility for integrating the Core Humanitarian Standard, and Sphere Standards, into the operations they preside over. Second, the IASC needs to do exactly the same thing for all cluster leads agencies. Accountability is too important to leave to the good will and good intention of humanitarian actors. It's time to make accountability compulsory.

Our third point is more sensitive--it's about the very real threats to the accountability agenda that the current funding crisis represents. If you allow I'd like to use the example of Iraq, where I am currently based as the Humanitarian Coordinator, to make this point.

Iraq is in many ways a kind of donor orphan. The donors who are contributing generously to other operations in the middle east, by and large, have been hesitant to do the same for Iraq. There are many reasons for this-- whatever the merits of these reasons, in the end, there are more than 7 million Iraqis who desperately need help and aren't getting what they deserve because the funding isn't there. Last year, the donors insisted that the Iraqi country team prioritise what was then a USD 2 billion appeal. We were told that if we didn't, our operation wouldn't be credible. So we prioritised. It was a very difficult process which obliged us to do something none of us wanted to do. Rather than calculating the costs of providing assistance to millions of people at Sphere standards, we were forced to retrench from the standards and calculate the costs of much smaller emergency packages for each cluster. The difference between the emergency packages and the standards represent an ethical gap. We expected, in good faith, that at least the emergency packages would be funded. They were to some degree; but in fact, only partially. We should make no mistake about this--prioritisation, the step-child of under-funding, is not a neutral process--it forces us to step away from our commitment to uphold international standards.

My own view is that humanitarian action only really makes sense when it is principled. Let's be frank. A principled response costs money. This has to come from somewhere; humanitarian assistance is too important to be voluntary. We need to consider all options including assessed contributions from member states or from taxes imposed by member states on the sale of guns or maybe even cigarettes. A principled approach means we need to assess needs collectively, on the basis of an agreed methodology, then calculate the costs of meeting these needs at Sphere standards and use the

Core Humanitarian Standard to ensure we are accountable to populations. Any other approach, honestly, isn't really ethical.

François Grünewald, Executive Director, Groupe URD, France

The road to this side event was a bumpy one. There has been much debate over nearly 20 years to get to the Core Humanitarian Standard. I believe context is everything. So how can we capture complexity through standards, or ensure our actions account for contexts that change from one day to the other' How will things that are valid today still be relevant in 5 years. Just think about the rather sudden rise of cash or 3D printing?

The good thing about the Core Humanitarian Standard is that is is not a technical solution, it's about asking questions. At Groupe URD, we like being confrontational and asking (the right) questions. At the end of the day, we need to avoid just coming with a recipe book and using standards as such. Accounting for context is not an easy task and it requires more than a book. It requires engagement with local actors if you don't want to end up doing by the book things that are totally stupid.

Even at the ICRC, doctrine is revisited. Revisiting our standards is what we should use evaluations for. We also need to acknowledge that sometimes, we don't comply with standards because of staffing or security issues. We need to know why we can't meet the standard to figure out how to improve, and as the migrant crisis is showing us, we need to be agile to adapt to quickly changing situations. That's why we need to keep asking questions such as those in the Core Humanitarian Standard.