

Moving beyond Sphere standards

The Sphere Standards, contain the “Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response”¹, these standards were defined as a minimum ground for humanitarian responses, to ensure that a certain degree of quality is provided in different sectors of the humanitarian responses².

After 23 years of its origin, the humanitarian sector has evolved significantly and the practice and experience accumulated has brought new elements on how the quality of humanitarian responses should be guaranteed by the global humanitarian community. The Sphere standards have been revised and enriched and new instruments as the Core Humanitarian Standard³ have come to complement and give broader perspective to the standards themselves.

No doubt, the Sphere minimum standards have been a very useful tool to provide minimum levels of quality humanitarian response and articulate professional dialogues among humanitarian actors. Nevertheless, three main points must be considered and debated for the future:

1. The concept of minimum standard
2. The Sphere standards in diverse humanitarian contexts, and particularly after COVID-19
3. The Sphere standards in the localization agenda⁴

1. The concept of minimum standard

Sphere standards were designed as minimum standards, that is, the minimal quality parameters that must be ensured, at least, to accept that the humanitarian response has a basic level of quality and respects human dignity.

As the standards were set, dilemmas were confronted on the appropriateness of these standards in contexts of extreme structural poverty, or in the cases where serious dilemmas in terms of the distribution of resources among different communities in need, or several competing needs are confronted.

1 <https://spherestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/Sphere-Handbook-2018-EN.pdf>

²The Sphere Project was initiated in 1997 by a group of NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to develop a set of universal minimum standards in core areas of humanitarian response.

³ <https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard>

⁴ <https://charter4change.files.wordpress.com/2019/06/charter4change-2019.pdf>

In addition to this, the desire of donors, of reaching the highest number of people and crises, has led to a perverse tendency to interpret the “minimum standards” as “maximum standards”, and considering them as a kind of luxury within the deprived communities affected by the communities.

This has generated a spiral down of the standards, undermining its real purpose, and in some cases becoming an instrument of manipulation by donors, under the argument: *“there are no more resources, and the minimum standards are more than enough for people affected by crises”*.

This perverse manipulation of the right to dignified humanitarian assistance, under the argument of the minimum level of services, must be denounced and addressed.

2. The Sphere standards in diverse humanitarian contexts, and particularly after COVID-19.

Humanitarian crises are extremely contextual, although we can learn a lot from one crisis to the other, the fact that it is a crisis, makes it always specific to its context. This has posed many questions on how to apply the Sphere standards.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has become the most global humanitarian crises of the recent history and probably ever in humankind memories, raises new questions about how the Sphere standards are suitable, or not in this new context, and how far the rigid and minimalist interpretation of the Sphere standards, have become now a factor of increased vulnerability for many communities affected by previous crises and who are now experiencing the overlapping of COVID-19 with their own on-going crises. This has been critical in all sectors of humanitarian response, but it has been extremely acute in two key areas: Shelter and WASH.

As the most effective preventive measures for COVID-19 are: social distancing and hygiene; the way in which these two parameters have been translated into shelter standards and into WASH standards, have determined the effectiveness or not of these important sectors in combating COVID-19 propagation, particularly in IDP camps and refugee camps.

3. The Sphere standards in the localization agenda

The localisation agenda has proven to be out of track in its implementation in the last 4 years, since it was launched after the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. The competing interests of the INGOS, and their own institutional priorities over the declarations and commitments for localisation, has hampered an effective implementation of the localisation agenda.

Local and National humanitarian actors are still regarded, by most INGOS and donors, as unable, non-reliable, and non-qualified to do an effective and accountable humanitarian work. The reality is that little evidence is provided beyond these bold statements. On the contrary, the COVID-19 crisis has underlined the lack of capacity of

most INGOs to intervene effectively in this complex crisis, and has put in the frontline of the response all the local and national actors.

Amid of this complex context, INGO and donors, with few exceptions, have maintained their “disconnected reality” approach, inquiring Local and National NGOs on many irrelevant theoretical aspects on the humanitarian programmes that Local and National NGOs were implementing to fight against COVID-19, while trying to reduce the standards of responses to the minimum possible level, and ignoring any criticism about the consequences that these miserable interpretation of the Sphere standards, done over the last two decades, has had on the expansion of COVID-19 among the communities affected by chronic crises.

Urgent revision needed.

Under these arguments, it is urgent and critical for the survival of the humanitarian community:

1. To evaluate the impact that the implementation of the Sphere standards, in the way they have been interpreted over the last two decades, has had as a fuelling factor of the COVID-19 pandemic, among those communities affected by other chronic humanitarian crises.
2. Revise the Sphere minimum standards, particularly those for Shelter and WASH, under the COVID-19 perspective.
3. Have a profound debate of the understanding of what a minimum standard is and what a dignified standard must be, so that there is not misinterpretation of the standard that should guide any humanitarian intervention.
4. Give a genuine and authentic leadership on this debate to the Local and National Humanitarian actors across the globe, and stop the western Anglo-Saxon patronising attitude, that still dominates the global Humanitarian community.

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