

Fostering Accountability and Quality among Humanitarian Aid Agencies through a process of Accreditation:

History, overview of current options and potential contribution from Sphere

The first two sections of this paper – History and Overview of current options – were commissioned by the Sphere Project at the request of the Sphere Board, and were written by Manohar Shenoy, independent consultant. Terms of Reference for his consultancy are available from the Sphere office on request. Section 3 of the paper, Potential contribution from Sphere, was prepared by the Sphere Office, based on a paper prepared for CARE by Sean Lowrie, Clare Smith and Sally Austin (see footnote 17). Section 4, An Accreditation/Certification System -how could Sphere fit in?, was prepared by the Sphere Office.

A paper commissioned in 2000 by the then Sphere Management Committee: Loubna Freih, 'Increasing Accountability among humanitarian NGOs in Disaster Response: A study for the Sphere Project Management Committee' is also relevant. It contains a section on accreditation (pp 13-14). It is available from the Sphere project website at <http://www.sphereproject.org/about/account.htm>

1. History:

Recognizing the need to strengthen humanitarian aid efforts globally by enhancing the quality of response and accountability to beneficiaries, international humanitarian aid agencies developed a number of codes and standards to strengthen their collective response to the many global crises that had emerged in the early 1990s. The Providence Principles (1993)¹, InterAction's "Best Practices for Disaster Work"² and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent's Code of Conduct (1994)³ were some of these initial efforts.

Despite these initial efforts, the entire international community including humanitarian aid agencies failed to respond adequately and in a timely manner before and during the genocide in Rwanda. The failure of the global community in preventing and responding to the aftermath of the genocide led to two notable recommendations to the humanitarian sector by the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR-1994)⁴ 1) Self-Managed Regulation wherein under this option NGO networks would be assisted in acquiring greater capacity to monitor member compliance with the Code and Standards and 2) An International Accreditation System. Under this option core criteria for accreditation would be developed jointly by official agencies and NGOs.

¹ Humanitarian Action in times of war: A handbook for practitioners (Larry Minear and Thomas Weiss), also <http://www.jha.ac/article/a094.htm> (Pyrrhic Victories and collapse of Humanitarian Principles-October 2002).

² <http://www.interaction.org/pvostandards/index.htm>

³ <http://www.ifrc.org> also of interest may be

http://www.ifrc.org/what/health/hivaid/health/code/files/options_paper_sign_on_implementation.pdf

⁴ http://www.um.dk/danida/evalueringsrapporter/1997_rwanda also <http://www.odihnp.org/report.asp?ID=2607>

The genocide in Rwanda led to considerable soul searching by the international humanitarian sector leading to most humanitarian aid agencies favouring greater self-regulation⁵. This led to the formation of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Learning (ALNAP) in 1996, The People in Aid Code (1997) and the Humanitarian Ombudsman Project, later renamed the Humanitarian Accountability Project (1999), which became in 2003 Humanitarian Accountability Partnership-International. The recommendations also helped catalyse the development of the Sphere Project *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response* (first edition 2000). The Red Cross Code of Conduct and Sphere's Minimum Standards have been widely adopted by a large number of humanitarian aid agencies, including some of the UN agencies⁶.

Subsequent crises since Rwanda nevertheless witnessed similar failures of the humanitarian sector, the latest being that following the tsunami of December 2004. The Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) notes, "On self-managed regulation, it is notable that not one of the quality codes introduced in the last 15 years has any real enforcement mechanism"⁷. The Tsunami Evaluation Coalition refers to the JEEAR and reiterates again the need for an International Accreditation system⁸. Following the tsunami, the Clinton NGO Impact Initiative (Working Group on Professionalism) has also commissioned a study on "Professionalism of International Humanitarian Agencies" to see what measures need to be taken to introduce higher quality and accountability in the working of these agencies. The study is currently in progress and its findings are shortly to be announced.

Though the effort over the last decade has been towards increased self-regulation, there have been some efforts by a few agencies, notably HAP-I to raise the accreditation issue to a higher level of debate. However the bulk of these discussions have centered on benchmarking and drawing up standards and indicators of quality management*. The Humanitarian sector is still a long way from having a fully autonomous accrediting body. A few INGO's through individual initiative have moved towards accreditation through ISO 9000, notably MedAir, but these have been the exceptions.

⁵ Regulating Humanitarian Interventions: Alex Jacobs, Mango, April 2003.

(<http://www.mango.org.uk/pool/regulatinghumanitarianAJ3Apr03.pdf>)

⁶ Overview of Accountability Initiatives, Jan 2006-Kathrin Dombrowski-One World Trust

(<http://www.oneworldtrust.org/pages/download.cfm?did=353>)

⁷ <http://www.tsunami-evaluation.org/the+TEC+synthesis+report.htm> (page 85, Conclusions and recommendations).

⁸ Accreditation 'refers to the formal recognition by a specialized body - an accreditation body - that a certification body is competent to carry out... certification in specified business sectors. Accreditation is like certification of the certification body. An Accrediting Body, Agency, or Association is a non-governmental entity that sets standards for accreditation, administers the process of accreditation, and provides assistance, as it is able to institutions, programs, and the general public. Accreditation is a process by which an institution periodically evaluates its work and seeks an independent judgment by peers that it achieves substantially its own objectives and meets the established standards of the body from which it seeks accreditation.'². Certification 'refers to the issuing of written assurance (the certificate) by an independent, external body that has audited an organization's management system and verified that it conforms to the requirements specified in the standard. Certificates issued by accredited certification bodies - and known as "accredited certificates" - may be perceived on the market as having increased credibility³ Registration 'means that the auditing body has recorded the certification in its client register'. The organization's management system has therefore been both certified and registered. (HAP-International). (<http://www.hapinternational.org>)

* See endnote for some definitions of these terms

2. Current Options:

12 years after the JEEAR recommendations the TEC reiterates that the international relief system should establish an accreditation system to distinguish between agencies that work to a professional standard in a particular sector, from those that do not or have not done so. They suggest a two type regulatory process wherein on the one hand an external regulator judges the quality of work done, and on the other hand the market regulates players within it. The TEC notes that without external drivers, the incentive for change within organisations remains low, continuing to affect performance (see footnote 7). Some initiatives towards accreditation or better self-regulation are listed below.

1. InterAction launched a pilot initiative called **Self-Certification plus** in 2004. This initiative is designed to raise the accountability bar by testing a new methodology developed to promote greater consistency and rigor in the way members annually self-certify their compliance with the PVO Standards (see footnote 2). Self-Certification Plus is a learning exercise both for InterAction and its members. Evidence for 3 sets of standards are required: 1. Governance and Administration, 2. Core Universal Program Standards and 3. Organisational Commitment Standards.⁹ Of central interest is whether the evidence defined for each standard is viable and useful in practice in determining standard compliance, and whether the methodology proposed is useful and easy to follow. This system is designed more towards self-regulation than towards setting up an accreditation system.

2. HAP-International has taken the lead in promoting an **accreditation system**. HAP-I's efforts is based on:

- a) Defining indicators and benchmarks of “quality management” for the Accountability Principles
- b) Adopting standards for the process of accreditation
- c) Granting “accredited status” to suitable certification/registration bodies¹⁰.

The ISO 9000 model guides HAP-I.

3. The aim of the International Disasters Response Law, Rules and Principles Project (IDRL Project) is to reduce the vulnerability and suffering of people affected by disasters through the promotion and development of international disaster response law mechanisms to better facilitate the provision of expedient and effective international humanitarian assistance. Experience in the field has demonstrated the need for improvement in the legal framework to better facilitate disaster response activities. Lengthy customs processes for relief goods, difficulties obtaining over-flight or landing rights, communications restrictions and visa restrictions are just a few of the barriers to the delivery of urgently needed disaster response activities. Whilst there are many international laws and regulations applicable in times of disaster, ranging from multilateral and bilateral treaties to various “soft law” provisions and loose guidelines, the knowledge and application of these rules appears to be limited. In some instances, there may be no international laws or regulations in place at all, creating further barriers to effective disaster response¹¹. The IDRL Project's main function is to strengthen existing International Laws to facilitate improved disaster response. It does not seek to provide accreditation to NGOs but to facilitate their work by advocating to host governments the adoption and implementation of existing international laws.

⁹ InterAction's PVO Standards Self Certification Plus Guidelines- August 2006 (<http://www.interaction.org/pvostandards/index.htm>)

¹⁰ Accreditation, the HAP Way Forward-December 2004. (<http://www.hapinternational.org>)

¹¹ What is the IDRL project? -IFRC (http://www.ifrc.org/docs/pubs/disasters/IDRL_FactSheet01.pdf)

One of the key outstanding questions, however, is how governments can distinguish between 'credible'/professional humanitarian agencies, and others. The possibility of using the use of Sphere as an indicator of credibility has been raised, but remains a question for debate.

4. Besides recommending an Accreditation System (see footnote 8), the **TEC** also recommends **market forces** to regulate players. However this can be as challenging as having a regulatory body. Crucially market forces should imply that end beneficiaries be the final judge of quality, transparency, accountability, adequacy and timeliness of delivery. However these people are often the most disadvantaged during a crisis and have often lost their right or capacity to be included or heard (see foot note 7).

5. **AusAID** has developed a comprehensive system of **accreditation** of NGOs. NGOs need to be accredited by AusAID to be eligible for funding through AusAID NGO Schemes. These schemes (e.g. AusAID NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) and Country and Regional Cooperation Agreements) are aimed exclusively at Australian NGOs. Accreditation is also required for some programs that are substantially funded through Australian NGOs (e.g. Humanitarian Relief Programs). In addition to obtaining initial accreditation, if an NGO wishes to continue to access AusAID funding, it must apply for reaccreditation every five years. Peer review is the central feature of the accreditation process, with the Committee for Development Cooperation as the joint AusAID NGO advisory body working with the NGO community as a whole and the individual NGO under review. The individual review is designed to be a collaborative process that allows for ongoing exchange between the review team and the NGO¹².

6. **EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management)**¹³ is a not for profit foundation with a commitment to help organisations to excel in what they do. For **EFQM Commitment to Excellence** involves two main stages: **Self-Assessment**: The first stage is Self Assessment, which involves assessing the organisation against 9 criteria of the EFQM Excellence Model, in order to understand current performance. Second is the **Site Visit**. During the site visit, organisations are required to demonstrate their successful deployment of at least 3 improvement plans, based on the outcome from the Self-Assessment.

7. **Société Générale de Surveillance (SGS): NGO Benchmarking**¹⁴. The purpose of NGO Benchmarking developed by SGS is to provide NGOs, as well as the donor community and the public at large, with an independent assessment based on a comprehensive set of perspectives, namely:

- Dimensions of Best Practices: Board of Trustees, Strategic Framework, Integrity Management, Communication and Public Image, Human Resources, Fund-Raising - Resources Allocation and Financial Controls, Outcomes, Operations and Continuous Improvement.
- Contributors' Expectations: Transparency, Efficiency and Effectiveness
- Management Components: System, Activities (Programmes/Projects), Human Resources, Finance
- Continuous Improvement: Plan, Do, Check, Act.

¹² Accreditation of Non Governmental Organisations-AusAID
(http://www.ausaid.gov.au/au/ngo/pdf/accreditation_policypdf#search)

¹³ <http://www.efqm.org>

¹⁴ http://www.ch.sgs.com/ngo_benchmarking

SGS measures compliance against a comprehensive set of Best Practices criteria (translated into Objectively Verifiable Indicators) taken from a large selection of Standards and eligibility requirements currently used by public sector agencies. A very unique methodology enables the audited NGO to translate its results into a focused Continuous Improvement program.

8. ISO: ISO 9000 standards have eight **quality management principles** on which the quality management system standards of the revised ISO 9000:2000 series are based. These principles can be used by senior management as a framework to guide their organization towards improved performance. The principles of ISO 9000:2000 focus on improving performance by establishing 1) Customer Focus 2) Leadership 3) Involvement of People 4) Process Approach 5) Systems approach to Management 6) Continual Improvement 7) factual Approach to Decision Making 8) Mutually beneficial supplier relationships. Benchmarks for logistics already exist in the private sector through the ISO standards. For example DHL, a partner with the UN system provides technical know-how for logistics for Emergencies and Health Systems (notably for cold chain solutions), and is ISO compliant, with benchmarks and processes in place.

9. People in Aid ¹⁵The People In Aid "Code of Good Practice in the management and support of aid personnel" is the result of years of international collaboration by dozens of agencies. The Code is a tool to help agencies offer better development aid and disaster relief to communities in need, and is an important part of their efforts to improve standards, accountability and transparency amid the challenges of disaster, conflict and poverty. The Code reflects the growing attention of aid groups on issues of health and safety, diversity and equality, and is relevant for agencies engaged in development and advocacy as well as emergency response. The revised People In Aid Code: 1) Enshrines the overarching principle that "people are central to the achievement of our mission". 2) Aims to improve the quality of assistance provided by international and host country staff. 3) Offers agencies the best framework for effective human resources management, helping them assess and raise their performance.

The Code comprises seven principles: health, safety and security; learning, training and development; recruitment and selection; consultation and communication; support, management and leadership; staff policies and practices; and human resources strategy. Each of the seven principles is qualified by a number of indicators. People in Aid could be encouraged to develop appropriate benchmarks and indicators for Humanitarian Personnel possibly through a process of accrediting individuals, although this is clearly more problematic and difficult.

10. **Mango** ¹⁶exists to help aid agencies and NGOs to work more effectively. Mango helps **strengthen their financial management** by providing: 1) financial training for NGO staff; 2) finance staff work with NGOs; 3) publications, including their free guide; 4) professional networking opportunities; 5) consultancy services. Mango also contributes to raising professional standards in the NGO sector, for instance through their Who Counts? Campaign.

Concluding Remarks:

Despite the several Codes and Standards developed since the Rwanda crisis and their adoption by an increasing number of NGOs, the self-regulatory mechanism has exposed many weaknesses, foremost among them being a lack of accountability to the beneficiaries. The larger organisational

¹⁵ <http://www.peopleinaid.org/code>

¹⁶ <http://www.mango.org.uk/about/professionalstandards.asp>

and systemic difficulties encountered over a decade of humanitarian crises remain, underscoring the variability of will, capacities and response of the different implementing agencies and the inability of the donor community, separated from the end beneficiary, to play a regulating and/or enforcement role.

Of the various approaches indicated above, the HAP-I approach has some attractive features within it. For one its reach is global through a process of decentralization and accrediting certifying bodies. This reduces any North South divide. Secondly it is modeled along the lines of ISO, now established and widely accepted globally by the private sector.

However there are significant challenges to having one (or some) accrediting body/ies and a host of certifying bodies attached to it as has been suggested by HAP-I. HAP-I has already noted some of these challenges in their paper, “Accreditation, the HAP Way Forward”. The universal acceptance of one accrediting body faces significant challenge. The opposition by some Francophone NGOs to the Sphere Standards and the Red Cross Code of Conduct and the subsequent development of the Quality Project, is indicative of the challenges in getting the humanitarian sector to universally accept one or a few accrediting bodies. Significant too is the challenge in developing a decentralized system of certification that can adhere to the same stringent standards globally.

The TEC recommends benchmarking quality parameters and certifying processes within sectors and functions rather than organisations as a whole. While this will probably meet less resistance from humanitarian aid agencies, it nonetheless places considerable burden on the Accrediting and Certifying bodies. The process of monitoring and enforcement of standards also remains unclear, given that self-regulation has only worked partially. This requires greater consultation and debate with various agencies, UN bodies, governments, civil society and informed communities.

Defining standards and benchmarking quality parameters and ensuring that the cross cutting themes are embedded in the project design by keeping end beneficiaries foremost in all calculations could be the start of a certification process. This will undoubtedly require a number of benchmarks and indicators, but the Sphere Project is already uniquely placed to respond to some of these sector-wide challenges. However the Sphere Project requires strengthening in the “softer” aspects of participation, initial assessment, targeting, monitoring (by communities). Issues pertaining to protection also need to be benchmarked in a more stringent manner as this has a direct bearing on how agencies identify and reach out to the most vulnerable. This could be another area where the Sphere project could play a useful role.

3. Potential contribution from Sphere to a system of accreditation: Risk or Opportunity¹⁷

Although an accreditation system might offer an opportunity to spread wider and enforce the application of Sphere, it also presents a risk of possible misapplication of it. Understanding what it means to be in “compliance with Sphere” and how objective judgments can be made about it, are critical if Sphere is to be used as part of quality parameters for any future certification process.

¹⁷ This section is extracted and edited from the report “Conflict, Compliance and Sphere: What it means for CARE Sudan in DARFUR”, a discussion paper prepared by Sean Lowrie (independent consultant), Clare Smith (CARE International UK) and Sally Austin (CARE Sudan) – August 2005.
http://www.sphereproject.org/component/option,com_docman/task,doc_details/gid,123/Itemid,203/lang,English/

A possible working definition of Sphere compliance can be:

The reflective and practical application of Sphere guiding principles (Humanitarian Charter), common standards and relevant technical standards, in a co-ordinated, sensitive and flexible manner, taking into consideration the context in which humanitarian assistance is delivered.

1 - Application of the Humanitarian Charter and Code of Conduct

The Humanitarian Charter starts with an articulation of fundamental humanitarian principles, followed by a statement of roles and responsibilities, concluding with statements on quality and accountability. The Code of Conduct contains ten principles. An agency would have to demonstrate that it has reflected upon and applied all of the sections of the HC and C of C in such things as individual decision making, project activity selection, or decisions not to do certain things to maintain a humanitarian identity. This is not to suggest that long diaries of decisions and discussions be recorded, but it is to suggest that some form of periodic reflection on the wider ethical issues occur.

2 - Application of the common process minimum standards

Within the latest edition of Sphere there is a chapter detailing eight common process minimum standards starting with participation, followed by assessment and other stages of the disaster response project cycle, and concluding with staff capacity and support. These minimum standards would be relevant to all forms of humanitarian projects, whether in the four life sustaining sectors or not. Each of the minimum standards is expanded upon by the key indicators. When making judgments about whether an agency has met one of these minimum standards, the key indicators and corresponding guidance notes would have to be referred to. Meeting these minimum standards would therefore have to be in a contextually appropriate way, within the agency control.

3 - Application of the relevant technical minimum standards

Compliance would imply that minimum standards that are relevant to the project are met, through judgment with regard to the key indicators. As above, it is important to ensure that the key indicators are met in a contextually appropriate way, given the information in the guidance notes and an appropriate contextual analysis.

4 - Co-ordinated, sensitive and flexible manner

It should be clear that a degree of judgment is required in determining whether an agency complies with Sphere. The final aspect of Sphere compliance should be demonstrated reflection, and a deeper and shared understanding of how to apply the Sphere handbook in a manner that builds the quality of our response and doesn't detract from it. This can involve co-ordination between agencies.

Challenges of Sphere Compliance

Making decisions about how an organization should implement its programmes to be in compliance with Sphere according to the above definition is not without challenges. Programmes and projects would need to be guided by Sphere and not be hostage to it or blinded by it. Project goals will in most cases need to use adapted Key Indicators, that take into account the local and wider contexts and our interaction with them. Minimum Standards and Key Indicators would need to be applied to target areas in a manner that is reflective and highly concerned with the nature of the wider contexts and overarching nature of problems. Without holistic analysis and significant debate around determining what Sphere compliance means, organizations might

misuse the Sphere handbook, with the risk of in fact exacerbating human vulnerability for some of those we want to assist.

Challenge # 1: Common misperceptions about Sphere

An unfortunate yet common misperception of the Sphere handbook is confusing quantitative Key Indicators with Minimum Standards. For example, many people will claim that the “Sphere standard” for water is 15 litres per person per day. In fact, it is not. 15 litres pppd is just one of five Key Indicators for that particular Minimum Standard which actually says: “All people have safe and equitable access to a sufficient quantity of water for drinking, cooking and personal and domestic hygiene...” As a matter of fact, less than ten percent of Sphere indicators are quantitative.

One consequence of this misperception is that some aid workers believe that the Sphere handbook has limited value in complex environments. A more dangerous consequence is that aid workers and donors have attempted to apply the quantitative indicators to their target IDP groups without due regard for the Minimum Standards, the wider conflict dynamics, or for the living conditions of the surrounding host populations. For example, donors pressure their implementing NGO partners to attain the quantitative indicator for water in IDP camps when the surrounding community has much less than 15 litres per person per day.

There are some instances where displaced populations will be malnourished, weak, sick and vulnerable. Their immediate survival may depend on receiving services that are of a higher level than the surrounding population. For example, malnutrition is corrected through food of a high nutritional value. Another example would be that due to the higher degree of vulnerability to disease, displaced populations may need more clean water than a more stable and less vulnerable population.

On the other hand, free food and free water provided in an IDP camp can disrupt markets in the surrounding host population, and even pull people from the surrounding host communities into the IDP camp because life is better for them inside the camp than outside.

Evidently therefore the question of service levels between displaced and host populations is not easily answered. The misapplication of Sphere occurs when one doesn't know the question even exists, or when one believes there is an easy answer to project design which is drawn from the quantitative “easy indicators” in the Sphere handbook.

The misperception about what is contained in the Sphere handbook is easily disseminated, because the quantitative indicators are easy to talk about. Overworked and stressed NGO staff will look to a quick solution, and can be attracted to the quantitative “easy indicators”. Technocratic, blind application of a limited subset of the Sphere Minimum Standards was a major concern for the detractors of the Sphere Project during the debates after the launch of the project.

Challenge # 2: Ensuring that all relevant standards and indicators are considered

The second major challenge in applying the Sphere handbook is about ensuring a sufficient level of awareness about the framework and syntax structure of the Sphere handbook. It would appear that a large majority of the humanitarian community believe meeting the quantitative indicators is a primary objective of achieving ‘Sphere compliance’.

To illustrate, let us again consider that 15 litres pppd is one of approximately 70 indicators for the 11 Minimum Standards in the water/sanitation sector. The perversion of mistaking it for the water access standard, or mistaking it for all water standards is that questions of hygiene promotion,

water quality and water use are forgotten. Moreover, wider questions of participation, project cycle management and conflict sensitivity are similarly forgotten.

In another way, let us consider the following fictional scenario. An agency, responsible for water and sanitation in an IDP camp, estimates the total population of IDPs to be 10,000. Consulting Sphere, the programme manager divides the total population by 20 and decides that the provision of 500 latrines for the camp will be in compliance with Sphere. The agency sub-contracts a provide sector construction firm, which constructs the high quality latrines in under two weeks. Does this scenario comply with Sphere? The answer, should it need to be stated, is no. The use or achievement of one indicator does not mean that the agency complies with Sphere.

Challenge # 3: When there is insufficient capacity or insufficient resources to meet Sphere

The third challenge that stems from an insufficient awareness is a reluctance to take programmatic risks. An example would be the desire to limit the numbers of beneficiaries served by an agency to enable “Sphere to be met” in one group of people before expanding operations to a second group. This strategy (identified earlier this year in a Tufts University livelihood study on Darfur¹⁸ as “humanitarian containment”) might result in some people receiving no assistance at all. This is a clear breach of the Humanitarian Charter.

The conclusions of this study explain: “... A recommendation made by the research team relating to the international humanitarian response: Minimum standards can rarely be achieved at the height of an emergency and pragmatic decisions must be made as to the best strategy to achieve the progressive realization of rights for all affected groups. The strategy among some international groups interviewed was to expand only when minimum standards had been achieved in their current programme, which is a strategy for humanitarian containment not humanitarian action. This strategy may be linked with the plethora of evaluations that are underway, and therefore it may be helpful to review the purposes of these evaluations to ensure they are not contributing to the strategy of ‘risk free’ programming. (In other words agencies might play safe and keep their programmes small, manageable and risk- free in order to ensure that they will have the best possible evaluation).”

“Humanitarian containment” is a misapplication of Sphere. The problem is not inherent within Sphere, but the problem is how we use Sphere. In fact, the Sphere handbook on page 14 says: “... in the initial phase of a response, for example, providing basic facilities for all the affected population may be more important than reaching the Minimum Standards and indicators for only a proportion of the population. This handbook cannot cover every question or resolve every dilemma. What it can do is serve as a starting point, using standards and indicators based on consensus derived from years of experience and good practice; guidance notes designed to offer practice direction; and the Humanitarian Charter, which suggest a legal framework and a basis for advocacy”

Challenge # 4: Ensuring agencies address needs of host communities

The needs of host communities (and non-affected communities) should also be more prominent in the Sphere handbook. The delivery of services to the Sphere standards exclusively to IDP camps, ignoring the surrounding host populations, and indeed the population in general will severely impact on the effectiveness of the response and will impact on the conflict.

¹⁸ “Darfur Livelihoods Under Siege” by Helen Young, Abdul Monim Osman, Yacob Aklilu, and Rebecca Dale of the Feinstein International Famine Centre, Tufts University – <http://nutrition.tufts.edu/research/famine/>

For example, consider the following fictional scenario: in a long running chronic conflict, where population displacement occurs periodically, an agency hires a drilling rig and constructs a high-yield borehole in an IDP camp that ensures more than 15 litres of water per person per day. The IDP camp is located just outside a small town that has an existing system of small businesses (donkey carts) that sell and deliver water. These water deliverers support extended families. With the opening of the borehole, everyone from town stops paying for water, and collects water from the camp for free. The water deliverers are put out of business.

Is this in compliance with the Sphere standards? If you read the fine print, there are a few examples in the text of the Sphere handbook that implore the agency to consider the host population. This issue critically requires greater prominence in the handbook for complex emergency situations.

Those are only some of the challenges and risks that can practically face agencies that try to comply with Sphere without significant reflection, or adopting a more holistic analysis of the context in which they are working in.

4. An accreditation/certification system: how could Sphere fit in?

Sphere does not have formal members; it is "owned" by those who use it. This ownership is based on the informal acknowledgement of added value. As discussed above, so far no formal compliance mechanism to ensure adherence to the standards has been put in place. This section examines how Sphere could fit, if an accreditation/certification system were adopted.

In order to make the discussion as concrete as possible, the accreditation/certification system being proposed under the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) International Accountability Principles is taken as a model, into which a Sphere compliance tool could fit. However, such a tool should also fit within other forms of accreditation/certification systems.

Background to the proposed HAP-International accreditation/certification system

At present, HAP-International is in the process of drafting a set of measurable, actionable and affordable **Performance Benchmarks** set within an explicit framework of shared values. Combined, these values and the performance benchmarks define the quality of humanitarian action for those seeking to comply with the HAP Accountability Principles. They are the basis upon which monitoring, complaints-handling, and quality assurance certification are carried out,¹⁹ in a process of validation for its members. This process might form the basis of a future quality management and accountability accreditation/certification system.

HAP-I is modelling a decentralised accreditation/certification processes along the lines of ISO 9000 series of "Quality Management" Standards²⁰. In this context, Quality Management means

¹⁹ See draft Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management Standard draft document at: http://www.hapinternational.org/pdf_word/347-HAP%20Standard%203rd%20Draft%2027%20July%2006.pdf

²⁰ See the HAP accreditation Policy paper, "Accreditation: The HAP way forward", <http://www.hapinternational.org/en/complement.php?IDpage=73&IDcomplement=65&IDcat=10>

what the organization does to fulfill the “customer's” quality requirements and any applicable regulatory requirements, while aiming to enhance customer satisfaction²¹.

The certification process proposed within this model will issue written quality assurance certificates from an accredited body, stating that a successfully validated organisation meets the Performance Benchmarks specified in the HAP Accountability and Quality Management Standard. Detailed Performance Benchmarks identified cover the following areas:

1. Applying HAP's Accountability Principles through a quality management system
2. Implementing a transparent public information policy
3. Gaining consent from beneficiaries or their proxies and specified stakeholders
4. Capacity building
5. Improving the competence of staff
6. Running a safe and accessible complaints handling system
7. Continuous improvement in accountability and quality management systems

Sphere within an accreditation/certification system?

The question is now where does Sphere fit within an accreditation/certification system such as the one being proposed by HAP International? How can the Sphere Minimum Standards complement HAP-International Performance Benchmarks?

HAP-International Performance Benchmarks verify an organization's internal quality management system, and whether the delivered humanitarian action respected the needs, concerns, capacities and disposition of affected people. However there is still a need to assess whether humanitarian assistance provided meets or exceeds recognized minimum standards pertaining to the welfare and safety of the intended beneficiaries. In particular, whether it is satisfying specific affected people's quality requirements²² in 'life saving' areas of Water, Sanitation/Hygiene Promotion, Shelter, Food security/Nutrition/food aid, and Health Services. The Sphere Minimum Standards can provide a complementary and a very powerful tool to fulfill this need.

Stated differently, the HAP-International Accountability and Quality Management Standard is describing how accountable humanitarian organisations should manage their internal processes and activities in a way that delivers quality humanitarian action that respects the needs, concerns, capacities and disposition of affected people. Sphere is attempting concretely to describe the quality of the provided humanitarian assistance - *which is the output of a Quality Management System*.

As Sphere represents a practical articulation of the rights-based approach, the underlying principle of Sphere is that all people have a right to such quality assistance - regardless of political, ethnic or geographical specificity. The Sphere Minimum standards define the requirements for **life with dignity** in relatively general terms, while the indicators attach either qualitative or quantitative values to associated standards. Together the Sphere standards and indicators may usefully inform any aspect of humanitarian action, from assessment and evaluation to quality assurance auditing.

²¹ See <http://www.iso.org/iso/en/iso9000-14000/understand/inbrief.html>

²² Within the context of ISO 9000, Quality refers to all those features of a product (or service) that are required by the customer.

Sphere and the certification process: Sphere Review

Any process of conformity assessment for certification to the HAP-International Accountability and Quality Management Standard can use other existing voluntary Quality Standards whenever relevant, to complement the assessment of compliance to the overarching HAP-I Accountability Principles. Such standards include the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, the People in Aid Code and the ECB2²³ ‘Good Enough’ Guide to Accountability and Impact Assessment in Emergencies.

In the case of Sphere, it can be used as an efficient auditing or review tool, especially at the programme/project and field levels, to assess conformity with the Accountability Principle related to “*demonstrating compliance with the standards that apply in [their] humanitarian assistance work through monitoring and reporting*”²⁴.

Given the complexities described in section 3 above, related to making judgments about Sphere compliance, a special auditing/review process should be used, which takes into consideration those challenges. This should avoid misjudgments or wrong decisions about the actions required to ensure compliance to Sphere Standards.

Learning from CARE experience in running Sphere Learning Audit/Review Processes²⁵, it has been concluded that a successful Sphere compliance review should be an opportunity to reflect on project work from a quality and accountability perspective. However, as detailed in section 3, it is essential to use the entire Sphere handbook. Because the interplay between the project and its context is so important, it is crucial not to focus on any one part of the handbook (e.g. sector standards), without considering the others (e.g. principles, process standards, or the context). Although this could lead to meeting successfully one particular standard, it could also lead to more significant non-compliance elsewhere. We need to be aware of the range of different aspects that make up compliance.

Typically, the Sphere Audit/Review process involves running a 3-4 days participatory on-site self-evaluation workshop. A review team of up to 25 participants from the organization and other (agency, partner, local authority or donor) staff reflect on the project, using Sphere as a tool, and consult with project participants to find out whether the project is in compliance with Sphere. By the end of the workshop, participants should have developed ownership of future actions agreed, and have more of a stake in ensuring their implementation.

Reflection throughout a Sphere Review workshop should also be based on the following ideas:

²³ ECB2 is the Emergency Capacity Building Project: Accountability and Impact Assessment, a project of the InterAgency Working Group, consisting of Care International, Oxfam GB, Save the Children Alliance, Mercy Corps, Catholic Relief Services, World Vision International and International Rescue Committee

²⁴ See HAP Accountability Principles number 5 where it states that “members regularly monitor and evaluate compliance with Standards, using robust processes”, Draft Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management Standard draft document at:

http://www.hapinternational.org/pdf_word/347-HAP%20Standard%203rd%20Draft%2027%20July%2006.pdf

²⁵ See CARE Sphere Audit/Review reports on the Sphere website at :

http://www.sphereproject.org/component/option,com_docman/task,cat_view/gid,78/Itemid,203/lang,English/

- That there is not such a thing as “the perfect project”, and we are committed to continuously strive to learn and make positive changes to our project work
- That the context in which we carry out our programming is complex and challenging, and that we can face many decisions, challenges and dilemmas during the life of a project
- That we can benefit from getting together, to share and collect our experiences on Sphere challenges

At every stage of this process, the idea of striving for Sphere compliance should help the participants to challenge themselves and each other to reflect more critically on the quality of their work, and to identify actions to move towards better compliance. This involves reflecting on the principles set out in the Humanitarian Charter, the process standards (in Chapter 1, Standards Common to all Sectors), as well as the technical standards within the Sphere handbook.

The review process should be also designed to be a learning opportunity for participants. It should not be punitive or evaluative, and should include the following objectives:

- To understand and use Sphere practically
- To reflect on and practice accountability to the communities with which we work
- To document practitioners’ experience about Sphere implementation, challenges and compliance in practice

A Sphere Audit/Review process should be implemented periodically for the same programme or project. The resulting reports should be made public and can be the basis for a review by professional peers. Both self-study and peer reports could be the basis, with other auditing reports, for decisions on granting certified status.

Conclusion

A tool for Sphere compliance, based on a Sphere Review or Audit, could therefore be developed as part of an accreditation/certification system. The tool would then be used to support the process of certifying whether an organisation is reaching performance standards for humanitarian assistance, such as those being developed by HAP International.

Outstanding issues do however remain:

- What kind of process within individual organizations would be needed in order to perform judgments on Sphere compliance?

- What could be the risks and implications of such a process, particularly in terms of costs and therefore accessibility to smaller/poorer agencies, particularly national ones? At what level would ‘Sphere compliance’ be judged - project, country, globally in the case of international organizations? The resource implications of judging organization-wide Sphere compliance as part of a certification process are likely to be significant.

Sphere Project
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Endnote

Some definitions:

Standards: Standards are a level of excellence or attainment that are regarded as a measure of adequacy.

Benchmarks are a level of stratified Performance Criteria that a system/process is expected to meet. For example

Advanced Performance	Top level—indicates general competence &/or performance in all benchmarks within a standard and exceptional performance in a few.
Proficient Performance	Commonly the performance standard—indicates general competence &/or performance in all benchmarks within a standard.
Basic Performance	Indicates general competence in most benchmarks within a standard with difficulties in some of the benchmarks.
Novice Performance	Indicates difficulties in a majority of benchmarks within a standard.

Indicators are a set of qualitative or quantitative performance measures.