

## Birth of Sphere

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*This paper tells the story of the initiation and first year of Sphere. It traces the history of how the project was started and its relationship to other major events of that time, principally the multi-donor Rwanda evaluation. The paper describes how the basic structure of the Sphere standards was agreed upon and discusses why some sectors were eventually left out of the standards. Tensions and public disagreements between the agencies that created Sphere are discussed, along with the manner in which the chosen working processes contributed to the successful publication of the Sphere standards. We show how the process of policy formulation, which led up to the publication of the first edition of the Sphere standards, was as dependent upon the ability of the project team to work opportunistically as it was upon the application of agency principles. Finally the paper reflects upon the success of Sphere and lessons that can be learned from this early Sphere process.*

*Keywords:* Sphere, standards, institutional change, policy development.

### Purpose of the paper

The Sphere standards have now entered into the lexicon of the aid community and the production of those standards has entered into its folklore. Looking back with hindsight over the first 18 months of the Sphere process, one is struck by the number and passion of people involved in its production and the equal passion in opposition to the very nature the standards elicit from those who strongly disagreed with their philosophical basis. Phase II of the Sphere Project, which follows the time period this article describes, made an additional unique contribution to Sphere's success. The highlight of this phase was the focus on worldwide training (Lowrie, 2000). The history of the Sphere process has been written up before but this article seeks to reveal the policy processes and tensions that were critical in the very early stages of the Sphere effort (Buchanan-Smith, 2003).

Today the Sphere standards are available in a multitude of languages. Oxfam, purveyor of the English version, has sold more copies of Sphere than any other publication they have ever handled. Sphere is now firmly at the centre of the humanitarian endeavour and has undergone its first major evaluation (Van Dyke and Waldman, 2004). It has also now been reissued in a thoroughly revised edition (2004). An interesting note is that eight years ago Sphere did not exist.

We write this piece as two of the many insiders who were intimately involved in championing, driving and working on the project. We look back with hindsight and try to understand why this project took off as it did and continues to influence humanitarian practice.

## **History of attempts to build humanitarian norms and standards**

Sphere started as a project in 1996 to ‘move forward with a technical elaboration of the code of conduct’ (SCHR: 1997: 3). It sought to develop a beneficiary’s charter and associated set of agency minimum performance standards but its antecedents go much further back (Walker, 1996).

The tension between conviction-driven social action and studied professionalism with its standards, systems and accountabilities has energised humanitarianism since its founding years. In 1859, Henry Dunant initiated the International Red Cross by seeking to provide unprecedented outside assistance to the wounded soldiers on a battlefield in northern Italy. To provide this assistance, Dunant mobilised the women of the village of Solferino to voluntarily come on to the battle field with him to care for the wounded. In reflecting on his actions, when he got back to Geneva Dunant expressed it thus: ‘Would it not be possible, in time of peace and quiet, to form relief societies for the purpose of having care given to the wounded in wartime by zealous, devoted and thoroughly qualified volunteers?’ (Dunant, 1986: 136).

He saw the need to mobilise a social movement of the ‘zealous and devoted’ and yet ‘thoroughly qualified’ (Dunant, 1986). Was humanitarianism to be a social movement driven by compassion and ever open for all to join, or an exclusive domain requiring qualifications, systems of organisations and a recognised persona?

As humanitarian action has become more public through international media coverage, absorbed more private and public funding and as it has sought to deliver increasingly complex service in increasingly difficult environments, the pressure to perform up to expectations has grown. With this pressure came, among NGOs, a fear of external regulation that led to willingness to self-regulate pre-emptively. In the mid-1990s there was a real sense of unease, particularly among European NGOs. These NGOs believed that if they did not take the lead in implementing their own system of standards and accountability, they would find themselves required to accept systems defined by their governmental donors.

When the concept of a broad NGO-led standards project was first mooted in early 1996, at least eight other similar initiatives were ongoing.

To quote one of the early project proposals for Sphere:

1. InterAction is developing a Field Protocol to be used by US PVOs to help them work together in the field. They are also developing a short common training curriculum for relief health workers.
2. In Europe, MSF has taken a lead over the past decade in developing standard response packages. Equally the International Federation has developed a series of Emergency Response Units which standardise equipment, training and management issues across a range of relief sectors.

3. A technical grouping involving UN, Red Cross & Red Crescent and NGO personnel has been developing common standards on medical issues, such as a list of essential drugs in disaster response.
4. A similar grouping led by Oxfam and UNHCR has been developing standards in water and sanitation.
5. Two European-based NGO umbrella organizations, ICVA and VOICE, have advocated professional standards, and expressed a desire to assist in the elaboration of these.
6. In the UK, People in Aid, is developing a common set of standards in the field of human resource development.
7. Within the donor community the British DFID, Danish DANIDA and Swedish SIDA have all expressed concern over the need to develop 'performance standards' for the agencies they fund. The DFID is now leading a small inter-agency group dedicated to this end.
8. Within the DAC of the OECD there are moves to develop common financial reporting standards for humanitarian agencies (SCHR, 1997: 4).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, agency-specific handbooks had become popular and many of these were effectively being used as standard texts. UNHCR's guide on field operations being the most popular along with the Oxfam *Field Director's Handbook* and OFDA's *Field Operations Guide*. There were also more specific texts such as Oxfam's supplementary feeding guidelines and UNAIDS's guidelines for HIV interventions in emergency settings. In the health sector, MSF's clinical guides were widely used across agencies.

## The nature of the key organisational actors

Sphere started as a discussion among a small group of NGO operational and policy managers. One of the first issues confronted was who should actually be involved in and lead efforts to introduce quality standards to 'our endeavour'. Should it be the UN agencies, the donor community that funds humanitarian work or a commissioned outside academic group? We were unanimous in saying it had to be led from the operational community. Those who actually carried out the operations for which the standards were envisaged — and this meant almost always the NGO and Red Cross community. This would keep the product practical and, we hoped, minimise the chance that the whole process would get bogged down in inter-agency rivalry.

But, the NGO community is a misnomer; it doesn't exist. What did exist was a collection of variously styled NGO coalitions, principally the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR), The International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), InterAction and VOICE. Two key players who, in the early days of Sphere were largely outside these networks, were MSF International and the ICRC.

It was the SCHR that initially promoted the project that later turned into Sphere. The SCHR is a thirty-year-old grouping of chief executives from a handful of NGOs that work in both relief and development. It has a policy committee made up of the heads of emergency operations or leaders of disaster policy in each of its member agencies. A key to the success of Sphere was this particular consortium of seven individuals. It was this group: Nick Stockton from Oxfam; Peter Hawkins for SCF; Peter Walker from IFRC; Miriam Lutz from ACT; Rebecca Larson from LWF; Karel

Zelenka from Caritas Internationalis; and Graham Miller Ralph Hazleton from CARE International, who formulated the first plans for a standards project and drove the process that put the initial alliance together. Here were seven people, all of whom had been involved in humanitarian response, as field operators and headquarters managers for at least a decade, some for 20 years or more. All had at one time or other worked together on response operations, through the past decade of NGO growth and the challenges that opened up by the ending of the cold war. In essence, they were a group of people who understood and trusted each other, even if they did not always share the same views.

In February 1996, Stockton and Walker drafted a proposal which the policy committee submitted to the SCHR leadership for a project entitled 'Towards Quality and Accountability Standards in Humanitarian Relief'. This project was the beginning of what later became known as Sphere.

ICVA, InterAction and VOICE are very different alliances; they are composed of many more members, each such that their international persona is fulfilled by paid secretariat staff rather than by the direct representation of their membership.

## **What is in a name?**

In its early incarnations Sphere was known simple as the Standards Project. It was not until mid-1997, as the full proposal for funding was being developed and the full-time project manager had been hired that the Sphere name was used. Initially the group had been searching for an acronym around the words standards, humanitarian, relief and assistance. But acronyms never translate well and even words like 'standard' and 'accountability' mean different things in different languages. We, therefore, sought a name for the project that suggested globality, was easily translatable, could be expressed graphically and was memorable. Thus the not-so-useful acronym for Standards Project for Humanitarian Relief metamorphosed into Sphere.

The original goals of the project, as elaborated in the first document to use the Sphere title were:

To develop a humanitarian charter for people affected by disasters, in style similar to the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGO Code of Conduct. To compile, from existing material and current best-practice, a set of minimum standards covering minimum and relative essential goods and services, implementation of assistance, and stake-holder accountability. Where necessary, the project will draft new standards if no suitable ones presently exist.

By sharing the process of developing the charter and implementation standards widely within the international humanitarian community, to ensure that the resulting products are acceptable to the community and that a high degree of ownership is felt towards them.

To formulate and embark upon a strategy for the widest possible dissemination and adoption of the charter and implementation standards throughout the international humanitarian community. This may require a second phase of activities organised under the auspices of the SCHR/InterAction collaborative mechanism (SCHR, 1997: 7).

## **The role of the Rwanda multi-donor evaluation**

The now-famous Rwanda multi-donor evaluation is often credited as the catalyst for the birth of Sphere (1996). The reality was different. The Standards Project, which became Sphere, was being discussed well before the evaluation was published. Critically, many of the initiators of Sphere were involved in the Rwanda evaluation. The SCHR, Oxfam-UK, the IFRC, as well as many of the key donors who would later support Sphere were all on the Steering Committee for the Evaluation and met regularly throughout 1995 until March 1996 when the evaluation was produced (Eriksson, 1996).

That experience of working together, having a process that was rich in communication and a methodology of dividing up the work into sub-units under a well-thought-through strategy was seen to work and was built into the design of the Standards Project when the concept paper was developed. The meetings of the Multi-donor Evaluation Steering Committee also provided a forum to discuss the initial idea of a set of global standards and subsequently a more intimate environment to discuss with key donors whether they supported such a project.

## **The InterAction forum and WorldAid Geneva**

In April 1996, Stockton and Walker, who earlier in the year had submitted the original proposal to the SCHR, were invited to attend the InterAction annual forum in Washington and present to the disaster committee of InterAction the proposal for developing global standards. At this time InterAction was also grappling with a similar initiative. It had received funding from the Ford Foundation to develop standards in food security and water and sanitation. It was trying to move this work forward, though encouraging the voluntary work of its membership on the standards and had reached something of an impasse. At the forum meeting, the idea was mooted to fold the Ford Foundation-funded work on food security into the SCHR proposal, and thus widen the proposal to include InterAction's US membership. Eventually, the chair of InterAction's food security group became the sector manager of Sphere's food aid group.

The alliance between the SCHR and InterAction at a managerial and technical level was an essential element to Sphere's success. It truly took the initiative beyond Europe and gave Sphere a powerful lobbying voice in Washington and New York.

A few weeks later, the commercially organised WorldAid '96 global exposition in Geneva provided a venue which, fortuitously, brought together many of the leading operating networks, agencies and donors. WorldAid, which took place between 30 September and 4 October 1996, was driven by the realisation from the commercial world that relief was a growing business and there was profit to be had from selling it. WorldAid was in effect a trade fair. For many agencies the commercialisation of aid was deeply disturbing and many agencies refused the opportunity to take exhibition space. However, staff from all the major NGO networks, the ICRC and MSF, as well as the director of USAID/OFDA were present.

At a side meeting attended by some 30 people from networks and donor agencies and organised by the SCHR and InterAction, the idea of collaborating to compile an agreed-upon global set of standards for humanitarian action was debated. Against the backdrop of the published Rwanda evaluation and the 'commercialisation'

**Box 1 Sphere timeline**

April 1994 Rwanda crisis erupts  
 1994/5 massive relief effort in and around Rwanda  
 October 1994 Multi-donor Rwanda evaluation is proposed  
 February 1996 proposal submitted to SCHR for a project entitled 'Towards Quality and Accountability Standards in Humanitarian Relief'  
 March 1996 Rwanda evaluation published  
 April 1996 discussions begin between InterAction and the authors of the SCHR proposal  
 September 1996 World Aid exposition  
 October 1996 Fundraising for Standards Project begins in earnest  
 1997 Phase I starts with project staff on board. Sphere is named  
 December 1998 First standards published. Sphere Phase II begins, focusing on dissemination and training  
 January 2000 Full Sphere standards published  
 2000–04 Phase III of Sphere, including external evaluation and revision of Sphere handbook

of aid being flaunted in the background at WorldAid, the group reached a consensus that, despite the major differences in approach and ideological stance between agencies, it made sense to collaborate. With hindsight, it was really this impromptu meeting which turned Sphere into a system-wide collaboration.

**Sphere product**

From its inception, Sphere sought to be inclusive. In formulating the initial proposal for work, the authors recognised there was a great deal in the literature in terms of standards, guidelines and advice. The project sought to build on the existing foundation. The initial rationale was to seek agreement on which existing texts could be used as universal standards, whether they were Unicef, Oxfam or MSF publications. Then to identify gaps where no standards existed but were needed and seek a common format and rationale for standards. The governance, management and financing of Sphere reflected this approach.

The central importance of a rights-based approach was also present from the beginning of Sphere. To quote the project proposal:

To elaborate technical standards, which agencies should seek to implement, without reference in any way to the rights or aspirations of the assisted beneficiaries and claimants risks becoming a self-serving exercise concerned more with agencies' accountability to donors, than the rights of people affected by disaster. We therefore believe that any set of 'industry' standards must first be prefaced by a set of 'consumer rights'; a beneficiaries or claimants charter, which highlights what, under existing international law and declarations, a person should have a 'right' to in a humanitarian crisis (SCHR, 1997 : 5).

In early rounds of discussion, the hope was to make a more direct link between rights and standards. The idea was to have a four-part structure to each sector chapter with specific rights leading into each standard. This proved unworkable as the various

rights charters and conventions are simply not drafted to that degree of specificity. In addition, specialists in International Humanitarian Law and human rights law were opposed to any articulation of rights which either implicitly suggested that some rights were more important than others or provided an insufficient articulation of rights such that they might be advocated for and used naively.

## **Médecins Sans Frontières**

MSF played a challenging role in the work that eventually became the Sphere standards. When the formative meeting at WorldAid 1996 took place, MSF was there as an individual agency and as a member of VOICE. MSF, along with the ICRC, joined the SCHR halfway through the Sphere process. One condition of joining SCHR was to accept all its ongoing work. SCHR members did not have to promote actively everything the SCHR did; they could opt out, but they were expected not to lobby against common actions.

MSF, and in particular MSF-France, were extremely cautious, if not suspicious of the Sphere process and concept. Their caution rested on four lines of reasoning. First, humanitarian crises happen across such a wide range of environments, economies and cultures that it would be impossible to set meaningful global standards (Giesen, n.d.). Each disaster is unique and must be treated as such. Second, they argued that the element of solidarity in humanitarian response, or bearing witness, is of fundamental importance and that Sphere, by not promoting this and at the same time promoting a perceived more clinical professional approach, actively detracted from the independence and radicalism of humanitarian action. Third, as argued by Fiona Terry, although Sphere alluded to the rights of people caught up in crises, by seeming to reduce humanitarianism to an assistance business, it detracted from, trivialised and allowed warring parties to discount the legitimate protection role of humanitarian agencies (2002: 51). Finally, MSF was mistrustful of government donors and saw Sphere as providing them with a 'straitjacket' to constrain agencies and pull humanitarianism away from being a value-driven business to being more supply driven. MSF was thus always ambivalent about Sphere, welcoming it as an effort to improve technical competence but cautioning that it was imbalanced in not promoting sufficiently the solidarity and protection roles of humanitarianism.

The concerns of MSF and others over the basic nature of the Sphere standards continue to resonate today. Supporters of Sphere believe it allows them to have meaningful discussions about people's rights in disasters and to judge effectively whether or not an agency's actions supports or detracts from those rights. Opponents of the Sphere approach see this as window dressing and believe that Sphere, in choosing to articulate standards only in technical areas, has lost an opportunity to build a much more robust humanitarian enterprise.

## **Sphere governance**

The initial governance of the standards effort, while it was still an SCHR project, had consisted of the members of the SCHR policy group. There was one person from each SCHR agency. As the project evolved in its early months, two representatives from InterAction's Disaster Response Committee joined the Sphere management committee.

Later representatives from ICVA, VOICE and the ICRC were invited to sit as observers at the management table. Importantly, people attended in their personal capacities which made attendance stronger. This management committee became a close-knit group who all felt they had a personal stake in making the Sphere process work. The willingness of committee members to lobby for Sphere within their own organisations as well as to seek funding outside was critical in those early days.

Ironically, the ad hoc nature of this committee was one of the key reasons for its success. No attempt was made to form a grand alliance of agencies, or even a lasting alliance. It was a coming together of like minds to tackle a common problem.

## **Sphere management**

The committee very deliberately set a seemingly impossible deadline for the initial production of the Sphere document. One year was allowed from the initiation of the project to the publication of the standards. From the outset the committee recognised that discussions among experts around competing standards could easily get bogged down in endless wrangles and editing. Battling against a firm deadline, however, focused the attention of all involved on the important issues and kept the process tight.

To make this work though, staff with time truly dedicated to the process, were needed. A full-time programme manager (Susan Purdin) was hired for the planned one year of the project from July 1997 through June 1998. In the meantime, sector managers were identified from within the staff of the agencies that made up the management committee. The sector managers were fully seconded to the project for a six-month period from October 1997 through March 1998, with the project reimbursing all of their salary costs and thus having real call on their time. Using seconded agency experts in this way kept the project field oriented and practical; it helped ensure the continued support of the NGOs; and it ensured that the focus was on the provision of assistance.

## **Sphere funding**

Initial seed funds to start the programme came from Oxfam-UK and InterAction, with additional contributions by each of the SCHR member NGOs, but the bulk of the funding came from the donor community. Donors were approached to fund Sphere in proportion to the percentage of global humanitarian assistance they provided. Thus, USAID and ECHO were the largest donors but other governments from across the donor community contributed proportionately. The total budget for the project was within the capacity of a single donor to fund; however, the management committee decided to ask for contributions from 20 OECD donor countries as a way to start to garner their buy-in, as a demonstration of broad support for the project and as a way to avoid the project being 'owned' by a single donor. There was always a deep commitment to retain the project's control in the hands of field operational agencies.

## **The Sphere work process**

The project was officially launched on 1 July 1997. The first management meeting, with the project manager and two of the sector managers present was held in Geneva on 26 June. At this meeting, the name 'The Sphere Project' was adopted and VOICE joined the management committee as an observer (non-voting) member.

Initial project activities focused on promoting the project among all the actors in the humanitarian field. Meetings were held with representatives of UN agencies: UNHCR, Unicef, WHO, UNDP, WFP and UNDHA. A concerted effort was made to reach out to Southern agencies — management committee members disseminated information to Southern members of their networks and sector managers sought input from Southern colleagues and Southern-based agencies. ICVA and ICRC also joined the management committee with observer status. Outreach was made to representatives of governments in addition to those funding the project. Project promotional materials included a one-page description in English, French and Spanish, a web-page and a newsletter. The newsletter was distributed electronically and 300 print copies were mailed.

To manage the completion of the Sphere document on schedule, a work plan was created. It included a series of meetings and production deadlines for the preparation of the sector standards. In order to guide progress on the standards, a prototype outline for the sector chapters was prepared. It was by getting agreement for this outline that the three-part structure of the chapters was first decided. The three chapters were on standards, indicators and guidelines. When the sector managers completed their work, an editor, Isobel McConnan, was engaged to enhance coherence across the chapters.

The sector managers called together working groups of field personnel in their various topics. Each sector had a core group and an extended group that contributed to drafting, reviewing, commenting and revising the chapters. Much of the project communication was done via electronic mail, but the sectors each had budgets to cover the cost of consultative meetings. Meetings were held in various locations globally as the drafting proceeded. Once the chapters reached a first draft stage, a series of meetings were held to vet them in relevant settings. The locations included: Sarajevo, Kuala Lumpur, Conakry, Harare, Nairobi and Bangkok, among others. The final draft document was available for comment starting 28 March 1998, and ultimately printed in July 1998.

In the opinion of the authors, the highly inclusive and consultative nature of this early process in the Sphere project was a key element in its success. No agency or group was explicitly excluded and by the end of Phase I, over 200 agencies had a stake, at some level, in Sphere's success.

## **Issues that did not make it**

The focus on food, nutrition, water, health and shelter and their linkage to the Humanitarian Charter were not a foregone conclusion. There was robust discussion early on over whether a section on education should be included, with staff from UNHCR, Unicef and SCF arguing that the provision of education in refugee and IDP camps, on the edges of conflict zones, was an essential conflict-prevention measure and thus also an urgent life-saving provision.

At other times, there was agonising discussion over how best to capture cross-cutting issues, the two most obvious being gender and personnel management. These issues were dealt with by building them into the body of the main chapters, but for some people this has signalled a diminution of the issues' importance.

How to proscribe around reproductive health issues became a difficult topic for many of the church-based agencies, particularly the Catholic Caritas, on which to agree. Rather than break ranks on the project, it was agreed to enter a footnote into the standards signalling Caritas's opposition to the use of condoms as an HIV/AIDS-prevention measure.

Finally, the shaping of the Humanitarian Charter and its linkages to the standards was played out against a tension between the more rights-based agencies who wanted to see stronger language. Casting humanitarian assistance as a rights-based cause concerned, mostly but not exclusively, North American-based agencies. They wanted to avoid language that suggested beneficiaries and disaster victims had an entitlement to assistance by virtue of their rights.

## **The issue of accreditation and field-testing**

The issue of accountability to the Sphere standards was a constant subject of debate during that first year. There were essentially three camps:

- Those who felt that the standards were an internal issue to the agencies and should be dealt with through peer pressure, self-policing and other soft non-assertive approaches.
- Those who felt that to have credibility some form of accreditation would be needed where agencies could sign up to abide by the standards, or to develop the capacity to abide by the standards.
- Finally, there was a more cautious group which felt that Sphere should be totally neutral in its persuasion. Once it was published, it should stand on its own merits and be available, alongside other publications for individuals and agencies to use, or not use, as they saw fit.

The debate over accreditation became one of the hardest to resolve and indeed it nearly derailed the initial launch of the manual in December 1998. A few agencies felt strongly that Sphere was trying to go too far too fast or that the process of drafting Sphere had been too Northern-centric and too focused within the headquarters of agencies. They pushed for the first edition of Sphere to be seen as a draft, which would be field-tested for a year before final publication. The final status of this first edition of Sphere (the ring-bound version) was finally resolved in an accompanying letter, drafted only days before the launch, which went out with every copy of the standards. The letter made it clear that this was a version for field-testing and that attempts to build a formal accreditation system around Sphere would be shelved pending more research into whether such a system was needed and how it might work.

With the production of this first manual in December 1998, Sphere and the Sphere standards were publicly launched. The Sphere Project had taken a little over a year to get from the initial idea to the working project, and that project in turn took one year to deliver the first full set of standards.

## What did we learn?

The Sphere process and the Sphere ‘phenomenon’ today are unique in the humanitarian world. Why was it able to come so quickly from nothing to a global existence, and looking back with hindsight, what have been its shortcomings?

Part of the success of the Sphere process is not replicable. It was an idea whose time had come. The combination of events, political climate and people made it possible, but what turned a possibility into a product was the commitment of about a dozen people across a broad range of agencies. If the project had not been steered by respected practitioners, it would never have got the necessary cooperation from the field. If it had not had respected policy analysts on board, it would never have got the agency headquarters to support it.

In their year-long evaluation of the Sphere project, Marci Van Dyke and Ronald Waldman are clear that Sphere has had success at the practical level:

Although, for reasons explained in the body of the report, the evaluation was unable to determine directly its impact on the quality of humanitarian assistance to disaster-affected populations, it is clear that there is a widespread perception that it has had a beneficial effect (Van Dyke and Waldman, 2004: 5).

It has also had success at the policy level: ‘The adoption of the rights-based approach has been a major influence on the thinking and the operations of many NGOs and other humanitarian agencies.’(ibid.). Much of this success is undoubtedly due to the tremendous efforts in dissemination and training undertaken in Phase II of Sphere.

In the early days, people involved in Sphere often referred to themselves, jokingly, as the coalition of the willing, long before that phrase became associated with less-humane actions. Sphere deliberately started with those who wanted to be part of it, not those who should be part of it. It started small but always sought to be inclusive and to remain sufficiently flexible to enlarge its management committee, its expert groups and its donor base. There are similarities here with the successful process used to bring into existence the International Landmines Treaty. It, too, sought to establish a norm and then gradually bring in nation-states, rather than seek to negotiate a text acceptable to everyone from the start. The lesson to take away is that in the humanitarian world, being conviction driven and open to partnership is a better guarantee of success than the classical all-inclusive, but slightly mistrustful, diplomatic process.

Sphere is now five years older than when that first ring-binder edition was published. If we knew then what we know now about humanitarian aid, would we have done anything differently?

Sphere was always supposed to do two things: to improve the quality of humanitarian action, and to move it from being a supply-chain, assistance-dominated endeavour to a movement concerned with the rights and dignity of those caught up in war and disaster. In the former, Sphere is succeeding. In the latter, it is less clear. Perhaps if the very early idea of having the rights texts linked specifically to each standard in each chapter had been kept, it might have been less easy for users to pass over that first Humanitarian Charter chapter.

Sphere was never intended to stand alone. Throughout its development, the management committee continuously emphasised that it would not be a panacea for all ills. Without access to victims, Sphere is impotent. Without agency concern for

people's rights and dignity, Sphere is powerless. Without effective agency recruiting, training and performance measurement, Sphere is weak.

In the end, Sphere is as good as its users make it. If users approach it concerned for people's rights and dignity, it is an influential tool to help drive the quality and appropriateness of programming. It is equally true that people can and will use it simply as a set of technical standards and that donors can and will use it as a metric for cost efficiency. Sphere, like any process, has at times been hijacked and mugged! That we have had the tragedy of millions of deaths in the DRC and the continued appalling malnutrition rates in southern Sudan is testament enough that professional standards, interpreted restrictively as technical norms, grossly fail to support the victims of war and disaster.

Sphere, like the process that produced it, has its value in how people choose to use it: to serve the humanitarian organisation or to serve the victims of war and disaster.

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