Humanitarian standards - too much of a good thing?

John Cosgrave. 14 February 2013.

This paper examines where the humanitarian community is now in terms of quality and accountability, how we got here, and what some of the challenges are for the future. There are two broad areas of use for standards:

- Internal regulation: Standards provide benchmarks for individual agencies to measure their own work against. Thus they can help agencies improve the quality of the humanitarian action that they implement. This use of standards is broadly non-controversial and is widely supported in the humanitarian community. This is how most standards are currently used.
- External regulation (including peer review mechanisms): Standards provide benchmarks for external assessment of the performance of agencies. It is this use of standards and the associated question of regulation, accreditation and certification that is the most controversial aspect of the whole standards and quality debate.

This paper addresses the use of standards for internal regulation, and an associated paper addresses the issues of standards and external regulation.

Improving the performance of any system depends on feeding-back information to the system operators. Systems engineers refer to this type of information as a *feedback loop*. There is a strong feedback loop when the service users pay directly for the service. Put simply, if a service provider that is paid directly delivers poor service they will lose customers and go out of business.

Services with indirect payment, such as roads or health services paid through taxes, have an indirect feedback loop through political representatives. The quality of the feedback loop in such cases depends on the relative balance of power between the service users and the political classes, and the time available for the mechanism to mature. Here poor service delivery can result in political pressure for change.

In the humanitarian sector there is a fundamental disconnect between those paying for the services of humanitarian actors and those using those services. Many of the quality and accountability initiatives in the sector are essentially trying to get around the lack of a natural feedback loop by either:

- Establishing overarching standards such as the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in disaster relief* (SCHR and ICRC, 1994) or national or regional ones such as the Basic Operating Guidelines in Nepal (United Nations et al., 2010)
- Specifying quality standards for meeting the rights to life with dignity, security, protection, and humanitarian assistance at the sectoral level such as the Sphere Project (Sphere Project, 2011)
- Providing guidance that, though it may cover the whole humanitarian endeavour is largely focused on one department in an agency such as the People In Aid Code of Good Practice (human resources) (People In Aid, 2003) or ALNAP guidance (Beck, 2006) on evaluation
- Creating a specific feedback loop such as through the efforts of HAP International (HAP, 2010).

The humanitarian action sector has been marked by a large number of quality and accountability initiatives in the last two decades. A recent independent mapping exercise commissioned by the JSI identified 71 different quality and accountability initiatives either in, or that affected, the humanitarian sector (Cragg, 2012). An earlier study by HAP identified 70 initiatives (HAP, 2007). Only 22 initiatives appear in both lists, so between them they identify 119 quality and accountability initiatives. However, even this number does not give a complete picture of the (admittedly overlapping) quality initiatives in the humanitarian sector[1].

With few exceptions, these initiatives date from after 1990. Prior to this, the quality of humanitarian interventions was largely guided by agency specific guides such as the UNHCR Field Handbook or sector specific guides such as Oxfam guidelines on water or WHO guidance on supplementary or therapeutic feeding. In those days, knowing where such guidance could be found[2] was a key part of the knowledge set of humanitarian workers. These different sources sometimes offered conflicting guidelines to each other. The rapid growth of quality initiatives from the 1990s on has complex roots. These include:

- Concerns among humanitarian workers and others about the quality of humanitarian responses, especially in contexts like the Balkans where easy driving distance from Europe (and the low barriers to entry into the humanitarian system) encouraged the engagement of lots of new humanitarian actors, or contexts like the Gulf War where the UN was a belligerent.
- Technology. Television footage could now be instantly transmitted from anywhere around the world with relatively portable equipment[3]. The instant availability of compelling and sometimes heart-wrenching images changed the political dynamic of official humanitarian assistance[4] and increased pressure on agencies to deliver results quickly.
- A step change in official funding for humanitarian response in 1991, driven in part by the crisis in the Balkans and the UN-authorised intervention in Iraq. The ever growing official funding for humanitarian action has also led to an increased focus on quality.

[1] This is not a criticism of the JSI study, but a reflection on the large number of initiatives and the somewhat transitory nature of knowledge about them. Other quality and accountability initiatives include national initiatives such as the Somalia "Red Lines" (Somalia NGO Consortium, 2009) and the dormant Somalia Joint Operating Principles (OCHA Somalia, 2008). There are also agency specific quality and accountability such as Tearfund's guide to standards (Tearfund, 2009) and various UN or donor guides (UNHCR, 2007; UNICEF, 2005; WFP, 2002). Another gap in the mapping is the overall humanitarian reform process within the UN stemming from the UN's Humanitarian Response Review (Adinolfi et al., 2005) and the cluster system (IASC, 2006), financing initiatives (Channel Research, 2011; OCHA, 2010) and the increasing emphasis on good quality evaluation in the UN system (UNEG, 2008). Nor does the mapping include initiatives such as the Paris Declaration (OECD, 2005), which although primarily focused on development assistance, is also having an impact on humanitarian action. Neither is there a mention of initiatives monitoring overall system performance such as DARA's Humanitarian Response Index (DARA, 2012), Development Initiatives Global Humanitarian Assistance (Poole et al., 2012), or the broader assessment of the overall quality of ODA by Brookings and the Centre for Global Development (Birdsall et al., 2012).

[2] For example, one key resource was the September 1981 special edition of Disasters on Healthcare in Refugee Camps ("Special isssue: Healthcare in refugee camps," 1981). Despite its title, the 47 short articles in this issue contained a great deal of practical information on logistics, wash, camp layout, construction, managing contractors, fuel handling and even livelihoods, as well as on health.

[3] The author had direct experience of this when working in Western Tanzania in April 1994. Having learned from the UN radio network that large numbers of Rwandan refugees had begun to cross the border at Resumo into Tanzania, he rang headquarters in Europe on the brand new satellite phone, only to be told: "Yes, we know. We're watching it on CNN."

[4] The CNN Effect, the idea that media coverage influences foreign policy, is very much contested (Gilboa, 2005; Robinson, 2005). However it does seem that media coverage influences official funding for humanitarian action when there is no overriding policy concern (Olsen et al., 2003), and strongly influences private giving.

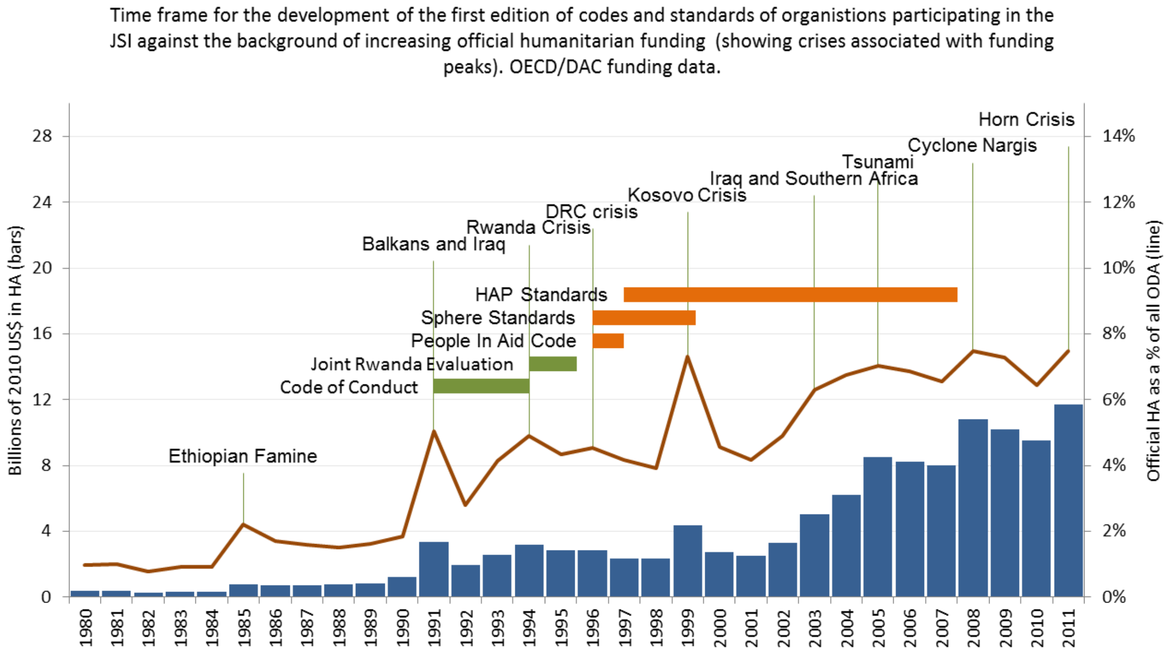

Figure 1: The timelines for the development of the first full edition of the People In Aid Code, the Sphere Standards, and the HAP Standards against the background of growing Donor and Multilateral funding for humanitarian action from 1980 to 2011, with an indication of the humanitarian crises associated with different funding peaks.

It was this context, of a need to focus on humanitarian principles and on agency behaviour that led to the proposal from the French Red Cross to have a Code of Conduct. Drafts of the *Code of conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in disaster relief* were in circulation from late 1993 and it was formally launched in June 1994 (SCHR and ICRC, 1994). This was only one of several concurrent attempts to establish a code of conduct for NGOs. In the United States, Minear and Weiss published the Providence Principles (Minear and Weiss, 1993), and a group of faith-based agencies produced the Mohonk Criteria for Humanitarian Assistance in Complex Emergencies (Task Force on Ethical and Legal Issues in Humanitarian Assistance, 1994).

The response to the Rwanda Crisis, the largest and most expensive humanitarian response up to that time, was in full swing when the SCHR-ICRC Code of Conduct was launched. While it was political, military, and diplomatic failures[5] that led to the largest loss of life, there was strong media criticism of the performance of aid agencies. Many aid workers were themselves concerned about the quality of the humanitarian response given high mortality rates after the start of the response.

Concern about the quality of the response to the Rwanda crisis was one of the factors that encouraged Denmark to lead a joint evaluation of the response. The evaluation began work in March 1995 and Volume Three of the evaluation addressed humanitarian aid and its effects (Borton et al., 1996).

This evaluation identified a number of short-comings in the international humanitarian system. Some of these were already widely known and had been addressed in other reports such as the September 1995 “Room for Improvement” report (Macnair, 1995) on personnel management by humanitarian agencies. The Rwanda evaluation commended the NGO initiative to establish a set of standards (which later became the Sphere Project). It recommended that there be some mechanism for enforcing standards and codes of conduct, either in the form of a special unit in what is now OCHA, or through a separate humanitarian ombudsman. This led to the Humanitarian Ombudsman Project, which in turn

[5] The reluctance of the west to get involved in Rwanda followed the debacle in Somalia in the previous year.

led to the Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP) after agencies decided to abandon the idea of having an ombudsman[6]. This in turn lead to the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership-International (HAP-I)

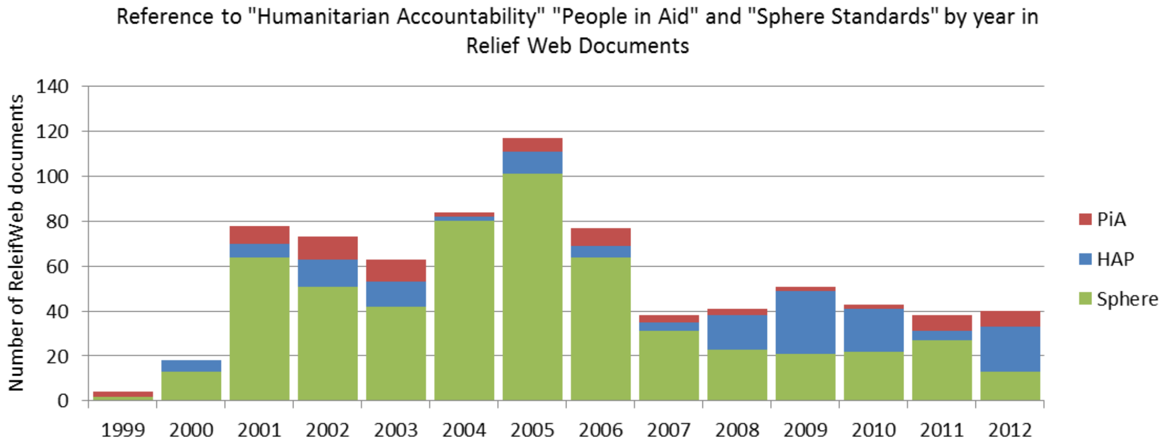

Figure 2: Number of ReliefWeb postings referring to the three JSI standards, by year. The decline in the number of references may be due to the internalisation of standards to the extent that they are a "given" within agencies and thus not referred to in postings.

The three JSI standards organisations each have a different focus: the Sphere Project sets standards for a number of sectors; the People In Aid code of practice provides guidance on human resource and people management; and HAP International sets standards for accountability mechanisms. The three standards are part of the wider humanitarian landscape (Figure 2).

Although separate, the three JSI standards overlap each other. For example the Sphere Standards provide guidance on human resources and on accountability, but not to the depth that the People In Aid code or the HAP 2010 Standard do. The Sphere Standards (which includes the *Code of conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in disaster relief* as a keystone) have been widely adopted within the humanitarian community[7] and provide a coherent guide to the sectors. They have been expanded through the adoption of INEE Minimum Standards for Education (INEE, 2010), The Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS Project, 2009), and the Minimum Economic Recovery Standards (The SEEP Network, 2010) as Sphere companion standards, which is a formalised relationship that includes consistency and coherence of approach.

Figure 3 offers a potential typology for standards, based on the JSI standards. This is a gross simplification of the current situation and ignores the inter-linkages and overlaps between the standards and quality and accountability initiatives.

[6] It should be noted that ombudsmen are most commonly found in Scandinavia, where Hofstede's "power distance" (the perceived difference in the power of managers and those managed) is relatively small. Large power distances (where employees are very reluctant to express disagreement with their managers) are typical of most developing counties (Hofstede, 1984). There is a significant power distance between affected communities and international aid agencies. It is difficult to see how complaint's mechanisms can work when power distances are large.

[7] For example, USAID revised the Field Operations Guide to ensure it was consistent with the Sphere guidelines.

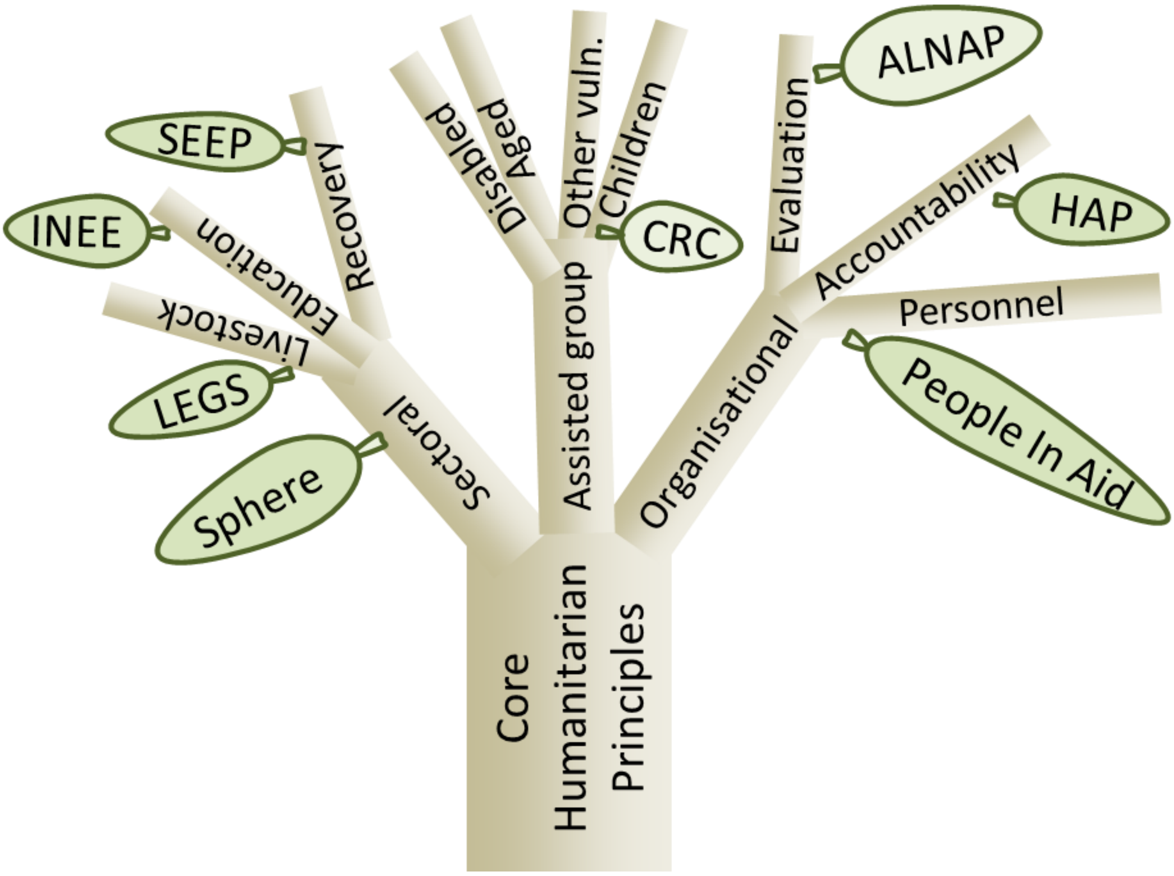

Figure 3: The standards tree: a potential typology for humanitarian standards. It should be noted that even where a standard is shown on a branch, it can still encompass the whole humanitarian effort, as for example the HAP or People In Aid standards.

The proliferation of standards

The proliferation of standards and of quality initiatives generally has had the positive effect that good quality guidance is now available on a wide range of humanitarian response activities. No longer is it necessary to have a long history and very broad experience in humanitarian response to be aware of what constitutes good practice.

However, the fact that there is such a small overlap between the HAP commissioned (HAP, 2007) and JSI commissioned survey (Cragg, 2012) of standards indicates another side of this proliferation – it is impossible for anyone even to be aware of all of the quality initiatives and standards under development in the sector at any one time. This risks the return to the situation before the 1990s where guidance was widely spread through a range of sometimes esoteric sources.

At the very least we need some way for recording the existence of such initiatives so that aid workers are aware of what resources are available.

The complexity of standards

A related issue to that of proliferation is the sheer complexity or volume of particular standards. On the positive side this means that the standards are comprehensive and cover a good many different contexts.

On the negative side, the size of standards documents means that they are not accessible to staff, particularly national staff, who do not have a high level of literacy or do not read in one of the languages in which the standards are published. The size of some standards makes it very expensive to translate them into lesser used languages.

Table 1: Page counts (including covers) for current versions of the standards (and companion standards) of the organisations in the JSI

Standard Document	***No of Pages***
2010 HAP Standard	19
The Guide to the HAP standard (2008)	249
The Sphere Standards, 2011 edition	400
INEE Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies (2010)	78
Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards, 2009	265
Minimum Economic Recovery Standards, 2010	140
People In Aid Code	32
Total for the current JSI and companion standards	**1,183**

Of course, humanitarian workers don't necessarily need to know the standards for every sector. Many humanitarian works are generalists, and need to be aware of the standards for a range of sectors, as do humanitarian managers.

Diffusion

International aid workers are only a very small part of the overall number of aid workers[8]. Most aid workers are national staff, either of international agencies, or of national government or NGOs. The proliferation and complexity of standards makes the task of diffusion of the standards to such staff particularly difficult.

National partners play an increasing role in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. National NGOs may be disadvantaged in an environment where they have little voice in the development of standards and quality initiative at the international level.

While managers need more complex information about standards, operational staff may need simpler summaries of the key elements. One positive initiative here is Tearfund's summary of quality standards for emergency response for their staff and partners. This guide is Tearfund-specific, and presents the agency's own standards and summaries of 11 other standards to which Tearfund is committed in a relatively accessible format.

Costs

All standards and quality initiatives have some costs. These costs are incurred in a number of areas; the costs for maintaining a secretariat, the costs of staff time in engaging with the standard, the cost of training staff about the standard, the costs of monitoring compliance, and any additional costs arising from compliance itself and the related record keeping.

Clearly, the costs of using standards increase with both the number of standards, and with their complexity. Against this cost must be set the benefit of better quality humanitarian action. Some costs may be only short-run costs and may save money in the long term[9] However, the costs of engaging with initiatives, of training staff, and of compliance generally, can be a heavier burden for smaller

[8] Extrapolations from Stoddard et al. (2006) suggest that international staff represent, at most, 2-5% of humanitarian aid workers.

[9] For example, it might cost money to manage the personnel function in compliance with the People In Aid Code but the benefits in improved staff retention etc. can outweigh the costs. A review of the impact of the People In Aid Code found that all of the organisations surveyed thought that the benefits of implementing the code outweighed the costs (Swarbrick, 2007, p. 12).

organisations. This can be a particular problem for national NGOs, especially when the standards are not available in the language used by most of their staff[10].

Conclusion

The last two decades have seen significant progress in improving the quality of humanitarian response. Even though there are still many outstanding issues there is now much closer agreement on what constitutes good practice. There has been progress on many of the issues identified by the Rwanda evaluation (Borton and Eriksson, 2004). Humanitarian workers and humanitarian agencies now benefit from a great deal of guidance on the standards they should strive to meet in humanitarian action.

Quality in humanitarian action is not an end in itself, but is merely a tool to ensure that humanitarian actors better serve the needs of populations affected by disasters and humanitarian crises both individually and as a collective. The present profusion of standards means that while guidance is readily available on any topic, it is becoming increasingly difficult for humanitarian workers to be aware of the full range of standards guidance. This, and the complexity of some standards, makes it difficult to ensure that national staff, either of international agencies or their national partners are fully informed on standards. However, such staff need to be fully aware of the relevant standards to ensure the humanitarian action is of an appropriate quality.

All standards and quality initiatives involve some cost. While we do need to improve the quality of humanitarian response, we also need to maintain flexibility in the system and ensure that the benefits of improved quality outweigh the costs.

One way of reducing costs is through rationalising the large number of current quality and accountability initiatives in the sector. However, this needs be done in a way which preserves any advantages that such initiatives bring, while constraining the costs of compliance. Simply reducing the number of initiatives risks losing out on some improvements, and may not reduce the long-run costs.

Consolidation is probably the biggest challenge for any new standards environment for the humanitarian sector. There is a need to balance the benefits of standards with their costs, so that affected populations are better served by humanitarian actors.

[10] The Sphere Handbook is the most widely translated of the standards with versions in Arabic, Armenian, Bangla, Chinese (draft version only), English, French, German, Haitian Creole, Japanese, Khmer, Korean, Kyrgyz, Russian, Sinhala, Slovenian, Spanish, Tamil, and Vietnamese. However, there are many more languages in the world, and although the leadership of an NGO may speak several major languages, staff may speak only a few minor languages.

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