

General standards in humanitarian aid: An overview

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Humanitarian aid addresses the victims of crises and disasters, aiming to save lives and mitigate human suffering, and is provided regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients. Over the last few years, the framework conditions of humanitarian aid have changed considerably. The political environment that humanitarian aid operates in has become more complex and complicated. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, for instance, humanitarian aid has increasingly been exposed to political pressure to contribute to the resolution of armed conflicts and to peace-building. In addition, the rising number of disaster events and the damage they cause have resulted in a steady increase in demands on the actors.

Against this background, the last 10 years have seen a number of initiatives to strengthen the quality of humanitarian assistance and to increase professionalism in human resources management. Compliance with internationally recognised quality standards, such as those formulated in the “Code of Conduct for the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief” or in the framework of the “TheSphere Project”, has increasingly been gaining significance. Which professional standards are of central importance to efficient humanitarian aid?

1. The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Response Programmes

In 1994 the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and a few major international NGOs drafted a professional “Code of Conduct” to set out universal standards to govern the way relief agencies should work in disaster assistance. It is voluntary, and it is applicable to any NGO working in humanitarian aid. The “Code of Conduct” is not about operational details in the delivery of humanitarian assistance, but it rather seeks to maintain the high standards of independence, impartiality and neutrality of humanitarian aid. It lays down ten principles which all NGOs should adhere to in their disaster response work. By 2007 more than 400 international and national NGOs have signed the “Code of Conduct” and, thus, have committed themselves to ensure the quality of their work, the professionalism of their staff and the impact of their efforts for those in need.

2. The Humanitarian Charter und “The Sphere Project”

The Sphere Project was launched in 1997 by a group of humanitarian NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The aim of the “The Sphere Project” is to improve the quality of assistance provided to people affected by disasters, and to enhance the accountability of the humanitarian system in disaster response. “The Sphere Project” compiled a “Humanitarian Charter” and “minimum standards” for five key sectors in humanitarian aid: water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter, and health services. In 2000 the first “Sphere Handbook” was published containing the “Humanitarian Charter”

and “Minimum Standards for Disaster Response”. “The Sphere Project” also provides training materials and offers training workshops.

3. Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP)

The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) was established in 2001 and is another initiative of humanitarian agencies committed to building a system of self-regulation based upon quality management and accountability principles. Its specific goal is to make humanitarian aid accountable to its intended beneficiaries through self-regulation, compliance verification and quality assurance certification. The HAP definition of accountability goes beyond an exclusive focus on the process of reporting upon or accounting for decisions and actions, but is geared at taking account of the needs, concerns, capacities of the beneficiaries. HAP laid down seven principles of accountability, e.g. “commitment to humanitarian principles”, capacity-building and communication.

4. The “People In Aid Code of Good Practice”

“People In Aid” was set up in 1995 as a network of development and humanitarian assistance agencies to promote better management and support of staff and volunteers. The underlying idea of “People in Aid” is that the impact and effectiveness of relief and development operations depend on the quality of the personnel and the support an agency gives them. The “People In Aid Code of Good Practice in the management and support of aid personnel” contains seven principles, e.g. regarding “Recruitment and selection” or “Health, safety and security”, and is a management tool that helps agencies enhance the quality of their human resources management.

5. The “Good Humanitarian Donorship” initiative

In recent years, emergency aid departments in donor governments have faced an unprecedented expansion in their funding. It has been recognized that it is not only important to make sure that enough money is available at the right time, but also that the money is used effectively. The “Good Humanitarian Donorship” (GHD) initiative, which was started in 2003, is a forum for donors to discuss good practice in funding humanitarian assistance. By defining 23 principles and standards it provides both a framework to guide official humanitarian aid and a mechanism for encouraging greater donor accountability.

Apart from these general standards in humanitarian aid there are more standards with a specific regional or sectoral focus, e.g. „The Ground Rules/South Sudan“ or („Code of Conduct on Food Aid and Food Security“.

Why do we need general standards in humanitarian aid?

General standards are a useful tool for quality management in humanitarian aid. General standards do not provide a blueprint for the delivery of aid, but they set parameters and they constitute commonly shared principles. Furthermore, general standards in humanitarian aid can be used as reference point for discussions between humanitarian agencies and between those agencies and other stakeholders.

The main drawback of general standards in humanitarian aid is that they are voluntary and self-regulatory like the “Code of Conduct” and “The Sphere Project”. These standards use rather cautious language, such as “We shall endeavour to...” and, thus, makes it more difficult to verify compliance. The HAP principles are the the only standards to which adherence is being controlled.

Further reading on the topic of standards in humanitarian aid

Good Humanitarian Donorship, *23 principles and good practice of humanitarian donorship*, <http://www.goodhumanitariandonorship.org/>

Humanitarian Accountability Partnership, *Principles of accountability*, Genf, <http://www.hapinternational.org/en/page.php?IDpage=3&IDcat=10>

International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (1994): *Code of conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in disaster relief*, Geneva.

People in Aid (2003): *The people in aid code of good practice in the management and support of aid personnel*, London.

The Sphere Project (2000): *Humanitarian charter and minimum standards in disaster response*, London.

VENRO (2005): *Humanitarian aid put to the test - Principles, criteria and indicators to ensure and monitor quality in humanitarian aid*, Bonn.