MODULE 21

Standards and accountability in humanitarian response

PART 1: FACT SHEET

The fact sheet is the first of four parts contained in this module. It provides an overview of standards and accountability in nutrition in emergencies. Detailed technical information is covered in Part 2. Words in *italics* are defined in the glossary.

What are standards and accountability?

Standards and Accountability are inextricably linked. On the one hand, Standards establish the thresholds or levels required to achieve the necessary quality for a particular good or service. Accountability is about explicitly giving account of whether such standards have been achieved. And 'giving account' implies a relationship; one 'gives account' to someone for the responsibilities assumed. In this way, a web of accountability relationships exists for any organisation, or individual. Each relationship has a different power dynamic – in terms of decision-making authority, control over resources, access to information, contractual obligation and so forth. Accountability can be understood as a way of reducing the power differential in these relationships, so that the potential to abuse that power is reduced. This is most critical in the relationship between aid-provider and aid-recipient. Evidence that aid providers have abused their power over aid recipients has fuelled a drive towards strengthening the accountability of aid agencies towards disaster-affected populations. It is this form of accountability, therefore, that is the focus of this module.

Standards

A standard can be understood as a descriptor of the quality of a good or service. Standards tend to be based on technical or experience-based evidence as well as principles, and can be qualitative or quantitative in nature. Standards can be legally binding, voluntary moral claims or entitlements that gain their strength through their wide application.

Legal standards are based on international human rights law (IHRL) and international humanitarian law (IHL). Such international legal standards include the right of all human beings to adequate food and to be free from hunger. The right to food is not a right to be fed, but primarily the right to feed oneself in dignity. The right to food requires States to provide an enabling environment in which people can use their full potential to produce or procure adequate food for themselves and their families. In addition, IHL stipulates that the starvation of civilians as a method of combat is prohibited – both in international and non-international armed conflicts.

Principles-based, voluntary standards

i. Humanitarian Principles.

The prime motivation behind humanitarian response to disaster is to alleviate human suffering amongst those least able to withstand the stresses caused by a disaster. This right to offer, and to receive, humanitarian assistance is known as the humanitarian imperative. It is a principle based on humanity and stresses that humanitarian response must be based on need, and no other grounds. This principle is derived from IHL, and forms one of three fundamental principles:

Humanity: to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. To protect life and health and ensure respect for the human being

Impartiality: no discrimination on the basis of nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions; to relieve the suffering of individuals guided solely by their needs; and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress

Independence: to maintain autonomy to be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles

In addition, many humanitarian actors, most notably the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) and UN, are guided by

Neutrality: not taking sides in hostilities (non-allegiance) or engaging at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature

These humanitarian principles have been incorporated into the Red Cross/NGO Code of Conduct. This outlines a set of ten commitments and responsibilities of signatory organisations to guide their humanitarian action. Similarly, the Humanitarian Charter of the Sphere project builds on the commitments made in the Code of Conduct and aims to provide a bridge between, on the one hand, the legal and ethical principles claimed by humanitarian agencies, and, on the other, the technical provisions of quality responses in key sectors of response.

ii. Technical standards

Sphere is perhaps best-known for establishing quality standards for key areas of humanitarian response, including Food Security and Nutrition. There are 18 minimum standards in food security and nutrition. These are qualitative, neutral, statements that are meant to be universal. They specify the minimum levels to be attained in humanitarian response. They are complemented by key indicators which are 'signals' that show whether the standard has been attained. Key Actions provide guidance on possible approaches to meet the standards and guidance notes provide specific points to consider when applying the standards and indicators in different situations. Guidance notes may also describe dilemmas, controversies or gaps in current knowledge.

In addition to the technical areas of humanitarian action, and building on the Humanitarian Charter, Sphere also emphasises the process of engagement through its Minimum Standards in Core Areas. These outline approaches that underpin all the standards in the Handbook. Each chapter, therefore, requires the companion use of the Core Standards to help attain its own standards.

People In Aid supports over 180 member organisations to improve their effectiveness through better management and support of staff and volunteers. A central feature is the People In Aid Code, which is a standard for human resources management in the aid sector. It reflects the belief that staff are the key to delivering effective programmes – including nutrition in emergencies. The Code is most usefully applied at the organisation level, although it can also offer guidance that can inform country-programme systems and partnerships.

Accountability

If standards are understood as the levels of desired quality, then accountability is the means by which to verify where the standards have been achieved. Accountability also includes standards – the levels of desired quality in the accountability process, such as those that inform audit procedures or financial accounting.

Accountability has many dimensions and many definitions. The term 'accountability web' has been used to describe the multi-stakeholder and multi-directional accountabilities of humanitarian organisations – to their board of trustees as well as to their donors, charity law, their partners and the people on whom their work is focused – disaster-affected persons. Agencies have recognised the need to be accountable to their donors and to their agency mission statement or principles, and have put in place systems to do so. These accountabilities continue to dominate agency practices. In contrast, there is currently no incentive, or obligation, to be accountable to affected communities, other than a voluntary commitment to do so. Indeed, people in need perceive that no actor is accountable to them. It is for these reasons that ùthe following initiatives have emerged and are highlighted in this module.

The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) is focused precisely on filling this gap. It offers guidance, technical support, advice and inspection services so as to strengthen organisations' accountability to affected persons. HAP has thereby created a critical focus on this area and developed many practical resources for its members and others to use.

The Emergency Capacity Building (ECB) project has identified four basic elements of accountability. At a minimum, humanitarian project staff should:

1. Provide public information to beneficiaries and other stakeholders on their organisation, its plans, and relief assistance entitlements.

2. Conduct ongoing consultation with those assisted.

   This should occur as soon as possible at the beginning of a humanitarian relief operation, and continue regularly throughout it. 'Consultation' means exchange of information and views between the agency and the beneficiaries of its work. The exchange will be about:

   • The needs and aspirations of beneficiaries

   • The project plans of the agency

   • The entitlements of beneficiaries

   • Feedback and reactions from beneficiaries to the agency on its plans and expected results

3. Establish systematic feedback mechanisms that enable:

   • Agencies to report to beneficiaries on project progress and evolution

   • Beneficiaries to explain to agencies whether projects are meeting their needs

   • Beneficiaries to explain to agencies the difference the project has made to their lives

4. Respond, adapt, and evolve in response to feedback received, and explain to all stakeholders the changes made and/or why change was not possible.

Standards and Accountability Promoted by the Global Nutrition Cluster

This remains 'work in progress' for the Global Nutrition Cluster (GNC). Of the various quality and accountability initiatives discussed in this module, Sphere is the only one specifically cited by the GNC at this stage, largely because of its nutrition-specific content (though with little reference to the Core Standards).

As the GNC Lead Agency, UNICEF's own policies may well influence the workings of the GNC. Specifically, the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action state that UNICEF holds itself accountable to, amongst others, the humanitarian principles; human rights based approaches, and the Sphere Standards. The evidence for how these are reflected in the work of the GNC, however, is not strong.

Key messages

1. Standards may be: legal, based on principles and/or voluntary.

2. Everyone has the right to adequate food and to be free from hunger. Furthermore, the starvation of civilians during war is prohibited.

3. Everyone also has the right to receive humanitarian assistance in times of disaster. This is known as the *humanitarian imperative*.

4. The humanitarian principles of *humanity*, *impartiality*, *independence* and *neutrality* provide a principle-based foundation for nutrition in emergencies.

5. There are a number of inter-agency initiatives to improve accountability, quality and performance in humanitarian action. The three with the most relevant to nutrition in emergencies are the Red Cross/NGO Code of Conduct, The Sphere Project and Humanitarian Accountability Partnership.

6. The Code of Conduct sets out ten principles to guide humanitarian action.

7. The Sphere project's Humanitarian Charter reaffirms that all people affected by disaster and conflict have a right to life with dignity; the right to receive humanitarian assistance; and the right to protection and security. However, there is currently no incentive, or obligation for humanitarian agencies to be accountable to affected communities, other than a voluntary commitment to do so.

8. The Sphere standards specify the minimum acceptable levels to be attained in a humanitarian response. The Food Security and Nutrition standards cover assessment, infant and young child feeding, management of acute malnutrition and food security (food transfers, cash transfers and livelihoods).

9. There are 6 Sphere Core Standards that are relevant to all sectors: i. People-centred humanitarian response; ii. Coordination and collaboration; iii. Assessment; iv. Design and response; v. Performance, transparency; vi. Aid worker performance.

10. HAP has outlined 7 Principles of Accountability to which over 40 HAP members have subscribed. They focus on accountability to disaster-affected people.

11. The GNC's attention to standards and accountability is not strong, though there is general endorsement of the Sphere Standards.

12. Nevertheless, the nutrition sector has benefited from a strengthened 'common vocabulary' across diverse agencies, which has contributed to improved peer accountability and learning.

13. One of the main unresolved issues in relation to standards and accountability is that there is no body with overall responsibility for technical standards in nutrition in emergency response.