New Sphere Standards for Food Security, Nutrition and Food Aid

Summary of published paper

An article in Disasters examines the recent revision of the Sphere Minimum Standards in disaster response relating to Food Security, Nutrition and Food Aid.

The new standards on Food Security reflect the importance of guaranteeing key food security elements, i.e. access to adequate food through own food production or other sources of entitlement, stability of food supply and availability through local markets, nutritional adequacy, cultural acceptability and adequate quality of food assistance (see box 1).

The article also describes how the revision attempted to incorporate the principles of the Humanitarian Charter, as well as relevant human rights principles and values into the Sphere Minimum Standards. The initial aim of the revision was to ensure that the standards better reflected the principles embodied in the Humanitarian Charter. This was later broadened to ensure that key legal standards and principles from human rights and humanitarian law were considered and also incorporated, in part to fill the 'protection gap' within the existing standards. For example, in the food aid chapter it states "Monitoring and evaluation: at community level, random visits to households receiving food aid can help to ascertain the acceptability and usefulness of the ration, and also to identify people who meet the selection criteria but who are not receiving food aid. Such visits can also ascertain if extra food is being received and where it is coming from (e.g. as a result of commandeering, recruitment or exploitation, sexual or otherwise (p.171)".

In relation to the food security, nutrition and food aid standards, it was agreed by participants in the revision process that the human right to adequate food and freedom from hunger should be incorporated. In relation to more general principles underlying the Humanitarian Charter, itself drawn largely from human rights and humanitarian law, it was agreed that there was a need to strengthen 'protection' elements within the standards and a need to incorporate the basic principles of the right to life with dignity, nondiscrimination, impartiality and participation (see new food security standard 1 above), as well as to explore the relevance of the concept of the progressive realisation of the right to food.

The questions raised in linking rights to operational standards required thought, on the one hand, about whether the technical standards reflected a deep understanding of the values expressed within the legal instruments, and whether the existing standards were adequate in relation to those legal rights. On the other hand, it also required reflection on how operational standards like Sphere could give concrete content to human rights, such as the right to food and the right to be free from hunger. However, the authors acknowledge that there remain challenges in...
examining what a rights-based approach will mean in terms of the role of humanitarian agencies as duty-bearers of rights, given that the primary responsibility rests with state governments. It will also require reflection on the modes and mechanisms of accountability that are brought to bear in ensuring the implementation of the Minimum Standards.

The authors conclude that it will be important to evaluate how meaningful the rights basis of Sphere is to users of the hand-book and how that affects actions and decisions in the midst of humanitarian crisis.

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Box 1: Minimum Standards on Food Security, Nutrition and Food Aid, some examples:

Assessment and analysis standard 1: Food Security
Where people are at risk of food insecurity, programme decisions are based on a demonstrated understanding of how they normally access food, the impact of the disaster on current and future food security, and hence the most appropriate response.

Food security standard 1: General food security
People have access to adequate and appropriate food and non-food items in a manner that ensures their survival, prevents erosion of assets and upholds their dignity.

Food Security standard 2: Primary production
Primary production mechanisms are protected and supported.

Food Security standard 3: Income and employment
Where income generation and employment are feasible livelihood strategies, people have access to appropriate income-earning opportunities, which generate fair remuneration and contribute towards food security without jeopardising the resources on which livelihoods are based.

Food security standard 4: Access to markets
People's safe access to market goods and services as producers, consumers and traders is protected and promoted.


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