SPHERE PROJECT PANEL DISCUSSION

Hosted by the Great Lakes & East Africa Inter-Agency Emergency Preparedness Working Group and the Overseas Development Institute

26 August 2004

Lundgren Auditorium, ICRAF World Agroforestry Centre, Nairobi

The meeting included a presentation from Alison Joyner (Project Manager, Sphere Project) and shorter contributions from Graham Saunders (Shelter and Temporary Settlements Technical Adviser, CRS Emergency Response Team) and Peter Walker (Director, Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University). The panel presentations were followed by discussion, as summarized below.

Alison Joyner explained the goal of the Sphere Project, provided a short history and described how the current version of the Sphere Handbook is organized. Results from the 2003 external evaluation were largely positive in that Sphere has contributed positively to the quality of humanitarian assistance, but with some qualifications, e.g.: the Humanitarian Charter not as well known as the Principles, Standards & Indicators; the difference between Standards and Indicators is confusing; the Project is still struggling to ‘reach’ people beyond the big international agencies, particularly staff of national NGOs, and national governments; the need for Standards that are applicable to relief – development transitions; and the difficulty of demonstrating impact of Sphere. A series of consultations undertaken earlier this year revealed almost unanimous support for the continued structure of Sphere. Positive meetings were also held with those French organizations who have been critical of Sphere, and continued dialogue was agreed. In June this year, the Sphere Committee met to discuss the future of Sphere. Although another meeting will be held in September to finalise future plans, it was agreed that Sphere should remain as independent NGO-owned structure, with small office in Geneva, and that the new Sphere Board will have wider participation from a bigger range of agencies. To close the presentation, various questions were put forward relating to the issues relating to Sphere in East Africa, and how regional links with the Sphere coordinating office could realistically work in practice.

Graham Saunders described the wide range of conversations with a wide range of actors that were held at field level as part of the revision of the Shelter chapter of the Sphere Handbook: this involved contributions from over 200 individuals from 120 organisations. Sphere usefully provokes a lot of discussion of the ‘big issues’. Two themes emerged from the revision process:

1. Standards versus guidelines: standards are seen as mandatory – if you don’t meet them you fail - whereas guidelines are regarded as being open to choice, often allowing for the incremental or progressive meeting of targets.
Donors tend to be wary of prescribed standards due to accountability issues, whereas host governments are supportive of having benchmarks or standards for what ought to be achieved. With the application of standards come concerns around no action being taken rather than taking action and being seen to fail to meet the prescribed standards. Certain language can clearly put people off, but the onus is on those promoting Sphere to make the content workable.

2. Rights promotion versus technical service provision. Sphere has promoted rights based approaches (RBA) and awareness of rights is now beginning to be apparent at the field level. However, Sphere might be criticized for trying to link rights with technical service provision and thereby running the risk of benefiting neither. There is also the concern that technical service delivery becomes so universal that it cannot respond to the complexity of specific situations. Similarly, the existing legal frameworks that support RBA lack the specificity to actually apply them in the field. Yet key issues arising from the field with regard to shelter and temporary settlements tended to coincide with those contained within existing legal frameworks, e.g. the appropriateness of an enclosure to the environment and cultural identity; access to, affordability and accessibility of services. Given the convergence of what people felt was needed with the existing legal instruments, the challenge will be in how to capitalize on this.

In relation to the current discussion for the future of Sphere in the region, Graham emphasized the positive aspects of having a collective approach (such as the Inter-Agency Group) to supporting and promoting Sphere since this has been once the key features of Sphere’s success to date.

**Peter Walker** presented and responded to a number of issues that have been raised in past critiques of Sphere:

- Sphere is essentially elitist, requiring a large agency with professionally trained staff, thus excluding smaller agencies: Sphere is and should be elitist because agencies must have the competence to do this work. In this sense, elitism is complement because it ensures a certain level of quality.
- Sphere stifles innovation because people stop thinking once they have a handbook to follow. This is certainly possible, but what must be emphasized is that the handbook alone is not enough to implement Sphere; technical and professional training is also needed to capture the broader context and the potential for innovation.
- Sphere is predominantly focused on Africa and refugee situations: although this was true of first version, it is not true of the revised version.
- Standards constrain independence in that they allow donors to have a ‘handle’ on the nature of the program, e.g. by using the acceptance of Standards as a requirement of funding.
• Finally, the Handbook doesn’t do everything; it’s not trying to tackle all the problems that occur in a crisis, only the basic supply systems needed to keep people alive. Issues of access and protection are not addressed. Some of the issues raised in present critiques of Sphere include the following:
  • Is if the right tool in the wrong context? Are standards that have been designed for quick emergency response also appropriate to complex and protracted crisis situations?
  • How seriously are agencies using and applying the Sphere guidelines? What should agencies do with the handbook? How is it used? What happens when programmes don’t meet standards? There’s a lot more that agencies could do to make Sphere more useful in their work.
  • In relation to impact assessment, there is a need to test further how the value of particular tools are judged.

Finally, regarding the future:
  • Sphere currently deals with food, water, shelter, and health, but are there other things that should be included? Education for example: young people and children are often drawn into violent scenarios, and education can prevent this. Should the handbook get fatter?
  • Can the success of the Sphere process be repeated in other sectors, e.g. by developing global livestock guidelines?
  • Sphere focuses on technical issues at the micro-level, not on the more macro-level policy issues such as land tenure. How can it tackle the macro issues and strike a balance between the macro and micro?
  • The humanitarian sector has the potential to establish a ‘profession’, i.e. a set of shared values, skills, and systems. Sphere could be the centre of efforts to build a community of professional practitioners in which there is a link between practitioners and academia (training, etc) and clients (with feedback between professionals and those they seek to serve).

Comments from participants:

1. Dane Fredenberg (CRS Emergency Response Team) suggested a sectoral approach to professional accreditation within the humanitarian sector, citing the example of RedR which provides a qualification for humanitarians working in the Water & Sanitation sector.

In the same way that psychology grew out of medicine, a more universal approach to professionalisation is possible by establishing an association of humanitarian professionals. This doesn’t start off with accreditation or a set of exams but through establishing a community with shared values. Another possibility might be competency validation at the agency level. Such an approach needs to start with the community and cannot be imposed from outside.
2. **John West** (World Vision) asked about the term “primary clients” – what does it mean and how does it relate to future in terms of communities and their capacity to respond to crisis?

   In business terms, a client is the person who paid for the service. But in the humanitarian system, it is the donors or those individuals who give to charity who effectively pay for the service. Similarly, in the pharmaceutical industry drug producing companies do not sell directly to patient, but to hospitals, pharmacies, etc. Given that there is no direct link to the end users, drugs companies make a big effort to respond to needs of these users or primary clients. As agencies, we need to understand better our primary clients and how they view the manner in which they wish to build their future. Methodologies for assessing community needs are not as well developed as they could be, as compared to more technical aspects, e.g. for assessing water quality. This also raises the question of producing a more “consumer-friendly” version of the Sphere Handbook.

   During the revision process, one of challenges was how to draw in the clients/beneficiary community to the process. Following the Goma volcano disaster, local authorities, NGOs, and representatives of displaced communities, came together for a field meeting. This proved to be a very interesting conversation for the community participants who were previously not aware of the obligations held by the authorities. As such, the meeting provided a way of raising awareness and reaching out to beneficiaries. The Sphere process provides some pointers as to how the voices of beneficiaries can be heard.

   This issue relates to the question of accountability (to whom?) and how we use participation? In the course of the Sphere consultations the process tried to involve community participation, but people lack awareness at that level. This is a critical issue for the future – how Sphere can reach more people.

3. **Gordy Molitor** (CARE) raised three points: (i) In relation to the discussion of standards and enforcing standards, he suggested that the lessons arising from the process of consultation for the standards for sexual exploitation of beneficiaries could be a useful approach to follow. (ii) If Sphere is going to expand the Handbook to include education, then the environment (particularly in relation to environmental damage associated with large refugee camps) could be another theme to be considered for inclusion. (iii) If Sphere standards are implemented in southern Sudan, then a situation would arise in which refugees are living at a higher standard than others outside the camps.
Sphere is in contact with the Sexual Exploitation Working Group in order to learn the lessons arising from this process.

The Working Group for Education in Emergencies is currently drafting a set of educational standards and there is potential that this might be brought under Sphere.

The environment provides one of the seven cross-cutting themes to all standards. In addition, the shelter guidelines contain a standard on environmental impact. The environmental aspects need to be re-examined.

The fact that many populations live below the Sphere standards was one of the issues that was apparent from the beginning of the Sphere process. As such, Sphere can act as an advocacy tool for what is wrong with broader development processes, providing a powerful reminder to highlight broader problems. The nature of vulnerability of people in an emergency context is different to those in long-term crisis (who have coping mechanisms to some extent).

The applicability of standards in different contexts was an issue that they grappled with in the revision process. In many locations, it was the case that the Sphere standards were higher than the level of the broader developmental context. This was taken in to account in some situations, e.g. India.

4. Hastin Yokwe (NESI Network) noted that Sphere is very much disaster-oriented and commented on the challenge of linking assessments and interventions in post-disaster situations to more sustainable, longer-term approaches.

This was an issue that was raised in the external evaluation as something that needed to be looked at. The question of which standards can be used in developmental contexts is beyond Sphere’s mandate but instead relates to governmental responsibilities and good development processes. Sphere guidelines can be play a role in post-disaster assessment, but the long-term improvement of people’s lives would have to be on-going.

In disaster contexts, it is often unclear when a disaster starts and stops and when Sphere can be used. The shelter guidelines are applicable over a longer time frame (about 2.5 years).

5. Zawadi Mawanda (UNDP Small Arms Reduction Programme) asked how much thought went into the standards vis-à-vis the way that victims are portrayed by the media.
The last of the ten criteria of the Humanitarian Code of Conduct refers to the ways in which agencies promote or exploit the ‘victims’ of disaster, emphasizing the need to promote people’s dignity. In their publicity and fundraising activities, agencies must balance the need to portray the situation as it exists in reality without degrading people.