

The Sphere Project

Humanitarian Charter
and Minimum
Standards in
Disaster Response

Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response

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The Sphere Project is a programme of the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) and InterAction with VOICE, ICRC and ICVA. The project was launched in 1997 to develop a set of universal minimum standards in core areas of humanitarian assistance. The aim of the 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 Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response are the product of the collective experience of many people and agencies. They should not therefore be seen as representing the views of any one agency. Contributors to the Sphere Project are listed in Annex 3.

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Introduction

Meeting essential needs and restoring life with dignity are core principles that should inform all humanitarian action.

The purpose of the Humanitarian Charter and the Minimum Standards is to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance, and to make humanitarian agencies more accountable. It is based on two core beliefs: first, that all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering that arises out of conflict and calamity, and second, that those affected by a disaster have a right to life with dignity and therefore a right to assistance.

This book is the result of more than two years of inter-agency collaboration to frame a Humanitarian Charter, and to identify Minimum Standards to advance the rights set out in the Charter. These standards cover disaster assistance in water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter and site planning, and health services.

Humanitarian Charter

The cornerstone of the book is the Humanitarian Charter (Part 1). Based on the principles and provisions of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, refugee law, and the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and (NGOs) in Disaster Relief*, the Charter describes the core principles that govern humanitarian action and asserts the right of populations to protection and assistance.

The Charter defines the legal responsibilities of states and parties to guarantee the right to assistance and protection. When states are unable to respond, they are obliged to allow the intervention of humanitarian organisations.

The Minimum Standards

The Minimum Standards (Part 2) were developed using broad networks of experts in each of the five sectors. Most of the standards, and the indicators that accompany them, are not new, but consolidate and adapt existing knowledge and practice. Taken as whole, they represent a remarkable consensus across a broad spectrum of agencies, and mark a new determination to ensure that humanitarian principles are realised in practice.

Scope and limitations of the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards

Agencies' ability to achieve the Minimum Standards will depend on a range of factors, some of which are within their control, while others such as political and security factors, lie outside their control. Of particular importance will be the extent to which agencies have access to the affected population, whether they have the consent and cooperation of the authorities in charge, and whether they can operate in conditions of reasonable security. Availability of sufficient financial, human and material resources is also essential. This document alone cannot constitute a complete evaluation guide or set of criteria for humanitarian action.

While the Charter is a general statement of humanitarian principles, the Minimum Standards do not attempt to deal with the whole spectrum of humanitarian concerns or actions. First, they do not cover all the possible forms of appropriate humanitarian assistance. Second, and more importantly, they do not deal with the larger issues of humanitarian protection.

Humanitarian agencies are frequently faced with situations where human acts or obstruction threaten the fundamental well-being or security of whole communities or sectors of a population - such as to constitute violations of international law. This may take the form of direct threats to people's well-being, or to their means of survival, or to their safety. In the context of armed conflict, the paramount humanitarian concern will be to protect people against such threats.

Comprehensive strategies and mechanisms for ensuring access and protection are not detailed in this document. However, it is important to stress that the form of relief assistance and the way in which it is provided can have a significant impact (positive or negative) on the affected population's security. The Humanitarian Charter recognises that the attempt to provide assistance in situations of conflict 'may potentially render civilians more vulnerable to attack, or bring unintended advantage to one or more of the warring parties', and it commits agencies to minimising such adverse effects of their interventions as far as possible.

The Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards will not solve all the problems of humanitarian response, nor can they prevent all human suffering. What they offer is a tool for humanitarian agencies to enhance the effectiveness and quality of their assistance and thus to make a significant difference to the lives of people affected by disaster.