

Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs

Minimal Humanity

Joël Glasman

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4 Standards

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“In this innovative and grounded study, Joël Glasman reveals how it came to be that the smallest unit of our shared humanity—its least common denominator—is neither you nor me, but the calorie, the liter of water, the metrics of our need in our moments of deepest distress. This fascinating work deserves wide readership and demands deep reflection.”

— *Gregory Mann, author of From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: the Road to Nongovernmentality (2015)*

“Combining a provocative perspective with a meticulous eye for detail, Joël Glasman’s insightful history traces humanitarian efforts to define human suffering through an index of vital needs. Minimal Humanity reminds us of the fundamental complexity of apparently simple matters.”

— *Peter Redfield, author of Life in Crisis: The Ethical Journey of Doctors Without Borders (2013)*

“This is a fascinating historical study of how and why humanitarian organizations quantified basic human needs over the course of the 20th century. Glasman (Univ. of Bayreuth, Germany) provides an engaging intellectual genealogy of the transition from subjective approaches to evaluating suffering to relying on allegedly objective and universal measurements. Using methods such as measuring the left arms of children for malnutrition allowed humanitarian organizations to claim they avoided politicizing assistance. However, organizations frequently debated how needs should be defined, as Glasman describes in detail with the *Sphere Handbook*, a humanitarian needs manual published in the 1990s. Just as humanitarian organizations claimed to be serving a generic humanity not defined by culture or politics, aid personnel also promoted an idea of consensus between the global North and South regarding needs. The author convincingly argues that this aspirational ideal of a common, measurable set of needs actually obscures the financial and political inequities between North and South, using Cameroon as a case study of the political and economic realities of how needs are measured in a humanitarian crisis. Specialists in humanitarianism should definitely read this book.”

— *J. M. Rich, Marywood University, Choice Review, Highly Recommended, November 2020 Vol. 58 No. 3*

“In his insightful and wonderfully jargon-free book, *Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs*, Joël Glasman delves into the history of what he calls the “bookkeeping of human suffering on a world scale (...) Glasman’s book is much richer than can be described here. It is highly recommended for scholars of refugees, humanitarianism, data, and the production of knowledge. Given his extremely readable writing style, the book can also be recommended to those engaged in the humanitarian field who may not have the time or patience to slog through other academic critiques of their work.”

— *Brett Shadle, African Studies Review*

4 Standards

The Sphere Project and the universalization of the vital minimum after Goma

One afternoon in 1995, two British friends met in a mountain village in Switzerland. Peter Walker, Director of Disaster Policy at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and Nicholas Stockton, Emergency Director with Oxfam, were once again ruminating on an old problem: Anyone could pretend to be a humanitarian. This problem had grown since the end of the Cold War: While superpowers and states were keeping distant from the planet's hot spots, everyone else was stepping in. Everyone was creating NGOs: Clergymen, TV hosts, aging billionaires, and adolescent rock stars. After the Rwandan genocide, more than 200 NGOs went to Goma. This intervention did not go well. Although international NGOs had been backed by high-tech army logistics and massive funding, they had been defeated by medieval diseases like dysentery and cholera. Even worse: The collapse of the humanitarians in Goma had been on the front pages of international media for several weeks. Venerable organizations such as Oxfam and the IFRC were struggling for legitimacy. Stockton and Walker had a long conversation while enjoying the view of Lake Geneva. After a few hours and "a six pack of beer" they had a plan: They would create "quality standards" for humanitarian action.¹

After all, almost all other industries already had standards that guarantee that products and services attain a certain quality that consumers can expect. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO), the headquarters of which were not far from Walker's office in Geneva, was an inspiring example: Its famous "ISO norms" applied to a broad range of goods and services, from the size of paper sheets, to the diameter of wool fibers, to the 4-digit PINs of international banks. Why not use the same kind of standards for the goods and services delivered by the humanitarian industry? That would make humanitarian aid more reliable, more accountable, and more predictable. The main question was: What does it take to survive a catastrophe? How many calories does a human being need? How many liters of water, how many square meters of tent, how many blankets? Do they need mobile phones? Condoms? Cigarettes? Where is the line under which less is nothing and more is optional? What is negotiable – and what shouldn't be?

Stockton and Walker titled their paper "Towards Quality and Accountability Standards in Humanitarian Relief."² They were neither lawyers nor specialists

in standardization processes, but they had many years of experience in aid relief, good knowledge of aid agencies, and a large network of friends in European and American NGOs. Stockton had a teacher personality (he had in fact taught sociology in the 1970s), while Walker acted as a coach, keeping everyone motivated and frequently giving pep talks. Both were good at bringing people together and pitching to donors and journalists. They brought their paper to the board of the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response, a forum of seven of the most influential NGOs, and started the work of convincing their colleagues.³

Twenty years later, the Sphere standards have become a key reference in the humanitarian world. NGOs have adopted them. United Nations agencies require their partners to use them. Donors like the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union recommend them.⁴ Some governmental agencies draw extensively on Sphere to shape their national disaster plans.⁵ The Sphere standards are used in relief programs, and in the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of thousands of aid projects. They are taught to managers in headquarters, to aid workers in the field, and to graduate students in universities.

The first version of the Sphere Project's "Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response" was published in 1998. The key argument was that humanitarian aid was, at least partly, quantifiable.⁶ The project was about defining "a minimum for survival."⁷ The Sphere standards were backed by indicators meant to help to measure their fulfillment. For instance, a standard for water stated: "All people have safe and equitable access to a sufficient quantity of water for drinking, cooking and personal and domestic hygiene." This standard was informed by indicators such as "At least 15 liters of water per person and per day is collected."⁸ Another standard, on food requirements, said that "The food basket and rations are designed to bridge the gap between the affected population's requirement and their own food sources." The indicators added some planning estimates: "2,100 kcal per person," including "10–12%" protein, "17%" fat, and an "adequate micronutrient intake." Another standard required that "Families have access to household utensils, soap for personal hygiene and tools for their dignity and well-being," with indicators like "Each person has: 1 eating plate, 1 metal spoon, 1 mug" and "Each person has access to 250 g of soap per month." The Sphere standards offered many more quantifiable indicators, including a "maximum of 20 people per toilet," and the criteria that "toilets are no more than . . . one minute's walk" from living quarters. They codified the amount of water for hand washing in public toilets ("1–2 liters/user/day"), for toilet flushing ("20–40 liters/user/day"), for anal hygiene ("1–2 liters/person/day"), and for animals ("5 liters/small animal/day"). They indicated the minimum sheltered area that should be available per person ("3.5–4.5 m²") as well as the average daily requirement of Vitamin A ("1,666 International Units"). They gave several definitions of acute malnutrition ("80% of median weight-for-height" or "<12.5 MUAC [mid-upper arm circumference]") and of excess mortality ("a crude mortality rate higher than 1 death per 10,000 persons per day"). They also provided a tolerable threshold for cholera fatality rates ("below 1%") and a description of the best way to bury dead bodies ("mass graves must be located at least 30 meters from groundwater sources").⁹

According to some, the Sphere standards have been a “radical” invention, “a landmark” in the evolution of the humanitarian system, and the “end of the age of humanitarian innocence,” perhaps “one of the most important developments in the practice of human rights in the last 30 years.” Stockton and Walker are remembered as the “fathers” of Sphere, while their teammates are deemed “mavericks” and “groundbreakers.”¹⁰ The Sphere standards are said to have led to nothing less than a shift in the humanitarian paradigm – in the sense of “Kuhn’s thesis of a paradigm.”¹¹ According to some, Sphere was “a revolution.”¹²

In fact, the Sphere standards are probably the most influential attempt to express an individualist and universalist ontology of needs in the language of numbers. There is no doubt about the immodest ambition of the standards: They were about “meeting critical human needs,”¹³ “urgent survival needs,”¹⁴ and describing “what people really need to stay alive.”¹⁵ The Sphere Handbook included many figures that were published well before the Sphere Project.¹⁶ But the Sphere Handbook claimed to be the foremost book on humanitarianism: A single document that offered figures on water, food, shelter, and health. Its definition of needs resonated with a common-sense definition, as well as with the individualist ontology of Maslow’s hierarchy.¹⁷ And just like Maslow’s definition, the Sphere standards defined a global horizon. The Sphere standards claimed to be applicable for all, whether one lived in a city or a village, in a rich or in a poor country, in the tropics or in the polar circles. The standards were to be used “anywhere in the world.”¹⁸



Figure 4.1 Covers of the Sphere Handbook (2000 and 2004 editions).

Source: The Sphere Project: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, 2000 and 2004. Courtesy of The Sphere Project

It is therefore no surprise that the bulk of the literature on Sphere celebrates the introduction of the standards as a major advance. For most authors, standardization was the result of a broad process of the “professionalization” of aid.¹⁹ According to this literature, the standardization of aid participates in the improvement of “global governance” through the improvement of “accountability,” “reliability,” and “efficiency.”²⁰

On the other hand, for most of the critical literature, the “standardization” is nothing less than a step towards the privatization of aid. In this line of thinking, the end of the Cold War was a decisive moment in the unleashing of neoliberalism. Thus, it is no wonder that humanitarian entrepreneurs mistook aid beneficiaries for “consumers,” that they reduced aid relief to the “delivery” of goods and services, that they fueled the “McDonaldization” of humanitarianism and the “McSpherization” of the world.²¹ Critics have reason to underline that standardization is not a neutral process, but that it is rather a product of power relationships, and that it, in turn, contributes to the perpetuation of these power relationships. Neoliberalism’s critics are right in showing that the quantification of needs resembles neoliberal thinking in some respects, with its passion for individualization, consumption, and competition.²² However, the *homo globalensis* described by the Sphere standards cannot be reduced to neoliberalism’s *homo oeconomicus*. The anthropology of humanitarians goes further, and that is precisely what, according to itself, forms the basis of its legitimacy: Humanity is not reduced to competition because, beyond a certain threshold, competition no longer has a place to exist; competition must give way to assistance. The Sphere Project’s challenge was to fix that threshold.

The perspective adopted in this chapter is different. Contrary to nearly the entire literature on Sphere, the point here is not to examine whether the standards are good or bad, whether they have had a positive or negative impact on humanitarian aid, or furthermore whether their creation has constituted a “revolution” in aid.²³ Here, through the example of the Sphere standards, the aim is to understand how a small group of people proposed, with a certain success, a universalist quantification of needs that has been the object of debates in the headquarters of the largest NGOs over the last 20 years.

The perspective adopted here is thus not normative, but historical. The version of history proposed by the proponents of Sphere is problematic because it is teleological. The Sphere manual tells us that the humanitarian standards are universal because they are the object of a broad agreement among humanitarians. The illusion would be to believe that the Sphere team *first* sought the best possible standards, and that it *then* succeeded in convincing the world to adopt these standards. In practice, they did the opposite. These standards were not the point of departure for the discussion about interests; they were, conversely, the result of *negotiations* that dealt with the interests of organizations, technical details, and strategic positions, all at the same time. The conventional wisdom gives the impression that the “technicians” come to agreement quickly (because they always bow to science), while the “decision-makers” argue and must be patiently convinced (because they defend the political interests of their organizations). However, at no moment did the experts involved in the Sphere Project create a distinction

between “technique” and “politics,” except at the very end of the process, at just the moment when the work of separating the *indicators* and the *interests* has been accomplished. Up to this final moment, all the actors, all the experts, all the consultants discussed the numbers, values, interests, conflicted in a jumble. The negotiations were neither cold nor dispassionate; they were, on the contrary – as Stockton himself says – “furious.” As this chapter shows, “technique” brings to humanitarianism no “neutrality” that would be external to humanitarianism due to its being generated by the objectivity of science. The “neutrality” of the standards is only obtained at the end of the chain, once all arguments about the standards have been exhausted, once a “consensus” was obtained.

How has that “consensus,” of which the proponents of Sphere avail themselves, been obtained?²⁴ All the available accounts up to the present rely on retrospective testimony given by the proponents and critics of Sphere.²⁵ These accounts are thus prisoners of the testimonies, which are largely contradictory: On the one hand, they present standardization as a natural consequence of the professionalization of humanitarian aid. On the other hand, they present the proponents of Sphere as visionaries. This literature therefore shows us Sphere proponents who would be at once all-powerful (capable of leading a revolution) and utterly powerless, because they would be content with merely bringing to pass that which was all along the hidden destiny of the “humanitarian community.” The official account of the actors of Sphere thus leads to a surprising contradiction, made evident in some of the statements of Sphere’s creators – epitomized by Peter Walker’s speaking of the Sphere standards as an invention at once “radical and inevitable.”²⁶

To escape this impasse, one must understand how the Sphere standards were elaborated before they became “universal.” One must go to Geneva, into a downstairs apartment on Avenue Giuseppe Motta,²⁷ ask for Juan Michel’s forbearance, find the keys to the cellar, sort through the boxes numbered 1 to 33 above the older labels (“clothing,” “kitchen”), and find a boxcutter to get past the brown tape. Then, one can start researching those documents that permit the retracing of the origin of the standards. In these boxes, one can find the minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meetings, the weekly reports by the Sphere managers, the successive drafts of the Sphere Handbook, some periodic reports for the donors, and, most importantly, a broad range of emails written or received by the managers.²⁸ Through these emails, one can start to grasp the uncertainties, the trial and error, and the successive attempts that resulted in the definition of these “minimum standards.” One starts to understand the controversies, conflicts, and arbitrage between the experts. One starts to realize that, notwithstanding what the proponents of Sphere may say today, science was not able to play the role of arbiter that it was meant to take on. A few minutes’ walk away from Avenue Motta, at the international headquarters of MSF on Rue de Lausanne, the reports, periodic bulletins, and emails from the same period give a different version of the history.

Humanitarianism after Goma

What was the problem to which Stockton and Walker wished to respond? In the mid-1990s, the big humanitarian agencies were faced with two major problems.

The first was the decrease in available financing.²⁹ The funds set aside by the United States for emergency aid were reduced by two-thirds between 1994 and 1997,³⁰ and the funds designated by ECHO, the largest humanitarian backer, plunged as well.³¹ Funds from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that were earmarked for development went from 62 billion USD in 1992 to 48 billion in 1999.³² Yet at the same time, the number of NGOs increased rapidly: There were 6,000 international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in 1990, and 26,000 in 1999.³³ The old humanitarian agencies like Oxfam (Stockton's agency, created in 1942) and the Red Cross (Walker's, which dates to 1864) suddenly found themselves in competition for funds with a growing number of new competitors.

The decrease in humanitarian financing demonstrated a second problem: A general decrease in confidence in NGOs. After the Cold War, NGOs started to intervene in crises at uncertain borders (Sudan, Afghanistan, Congo, Georgia, Chechnya, Sri Lanka, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Angola, Colombia, Kosovo); crises were thus considered to be less clear-cut (one spoke of "new crises," "new wars," or "complex emergency situations"), and the legitimacy of humanitarian agencies was no longer as evident as before.³⁴ What did NGO personnel, who were controlled neither by states nor by the UN's hierarchy, do in foreign lands? The large humanitarian agencies had a harder and harder time distinguishing themselves from the numerous other actors who pretended to be "humanitarian."

The crisis in Goma was paradigmatic of this crisis of legitimacy affecting large aid organizations.³⁵ Between April and June 1994, the Rwandan army, Interhamwe militias, and Hutu Power murdered at least 800,000 moderate Tutsi and Hutu Rwandans. On 4 July, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPR) took Kigali and ended the genocide, but this victory provoked the departure of two million Rwandans.³⁶ In just one week, from 14–18 July 1994, some 850,000 refugees left the country, most crossing the border between Gisenyi and Goma, to Zaire.³⁷ International organizations and NGOs therefore rushed to Kivu, where they constructed large refugee camps. Western governments, incapable of ending genocide, then over-invested in humanitarian aid.³⁸

Competition between humanitarian agencies was played out under the media's gaze. In July 1994, about 500 journalists found themselves in Goma, and news about the refugee camps broke into *Le Monde*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times* for several weeks.³⁹ One observer noted: "Goma looks as if it is hosting some kind of competition or election. Oxfam, Goal, Care, World Vision, WFP, UNHCR blare out their names and logos like soft drink manufacturers."⁴⁰ Even though Hutu militias seized the camps, and NGOs were faced with cholera epidemics, the complicity of states was relegated to the background. "Everybody was doing 'blame the humanitarians,'" as one analyst sums it up.⁴¹ The political and military crisis was represented in public opinion as a health crisis. "In the general public's memory, the Rwanda crisis was people who die of cholera."⁴²

The critique of humanitarianism was nourished by controversies among humanitarian organizations.⁴³ In November 1994, MSF France left the Kivu camps in a flurry of attention.⁴⁴ MSF asserted that humanitarian aid in the camps actually profits the perpetrators of genocide.⁴⁵ According to their diagnostic assessment,

the former Rwandan government had orchestrated the Rwandan population's exodus to create "humanitarian sanctuaries" outside of the country, permitting them to reconstitute a military force to attack Kigali.⁴⁶ The former functionaries, militia leaders, and mayors controlled the camps, assassinated their political opponents, and diverted food deliveries, which they distributed to their relatives and allies. MSF France denounced the NGOs that remained, claiming that they were thus "complicit" in the manipulation of humanitarian aid.⁴⁷

MSF was not the only NGO to express doubts about humanitarianism in Goma. CARE Germany refused to coordinate its actions with other NGOs.⁴⁸ Save the Children UK refused to go to Rwanda. NGOs, UN agencies, and governments blamed each other for the failure of aid.⁴⁹ The year 1994 ended with a *New York Times* article harshly criticizing humanitarian NGOs. It read: "the foreign medical volunteers did not know how to treat children with severe diarrhea," and gives other examples of missteps: "One charity, AmeriCares . . . shipped 10,000 cases of Gatorade [a drink for athletes] to Goma." Another one, Operation Blessing, an organization financed by a TV show hosted by the right-wing evangelist Pat Robertson, spent "more on flying its volunteers, which included television crews, to Zaire, than on anything else." The article concluded: "compassion was not always backed by efficiency."⁵⁰

Faced with these harsh critics against humanitarian aid, Western governments organized a collective evaluation of relief in Rwanda: The *Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda* (JEEAR). The project assembled representatives of 20 governments, 11 international organizations and UN agencies, and 7 large NGOs.⁵¹ For several months 20 consultants interrogated 620 experts and witnesses.⁵² Their report laid the blame on the NGOs, listing countless errors that were committed in the Great Lakes: Inexperienced staff members, ignorance of local languages, the dispensing of antibiotics for all sorts of illnesses, unsupervised injections, etc.⁵³ A "number of NGOs," the report concluded, "performed in an unprofessional and irresponsible manner that resulted not only in duplication and wasted resources but may also have contributed to an unnecessary loss of life."⁵⁴ Added to the victims of genocide were 100,000 deaths that "may be attributed to disease outbreaks and conditions such as severe dehydration that may be considered to have been either preventable or at least more controllable."⁵⁵

The humanitarian donors – USAID, DFID, WHO, UNHCR – reacted promptly to the NGO's documented fiasco: They introduced new tools to better control their implementing partners: Frameworks for project evaluation and monitoring, and the accreditation of NGOs authorized to respond to calls for bids.⁵⁶ The donors' message was clear: If the NGOs were not able to regulate themselves, governmental authorities would have to do it for them.

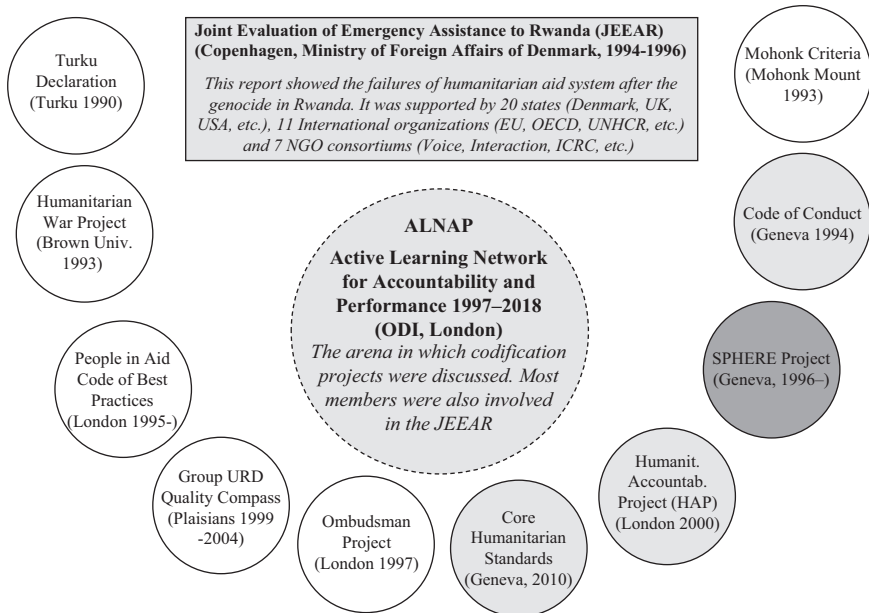
The *Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda* proposed its own way out. The first proposition was the creation of an independent institution that serves as a "monitor" and "ombudsman" of humanitarian aid.⁵⁷ This institution would permit aid beneficiaries to assert their grievances about humanitarian aid themselves. The second proposition was to develop "a set of standards" for humanitarian aid. This solution was an explicit nod to the "Standards Project" proposed

earlier by Nicholas Stockton and Peter Walker (who were themselves members of the Steering Committee of the JEEAR). This was not, however, a new idea: The strategy of the “codification” of aid had been the object of different projects in the last couple of years – the “Turku Declaration of Minimum Humanitarian Standards” (1990);⁵⁸ the “Providence Principles” of InterAction (1993),⁵⁹ the American “Mohonk Criteria” (1994);⁶⁰ the British “Code of Best Practice in the Management and Support of Aid Personnel”⁶¹ (1994) and the “Code of Conduct” (1994)⁶² were all recent attempts to codify humanitarian aid.

Thus, in the mid- 1990s, several groups of experts and NGOs were working on different codification projects – sometimes cooperating, sometimes competing with each other. In 1997, a forum was created to coordinate these initiatives: The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP),⁶³ hosted by the Overseas Development Institute in London. The British context was suitable for experimenting with new humanitarian tools: Newly elected Prime Minister Tony Blair was promoting a “New Humanitarianism,” whose definition was close to the standardization projects underway in NGOs:⁶⁴ “All people have the same basic needs,” wrote the British government: “fresh air to breathe, clean water to drink, uncontaminated food to eat.”⁶⁵

One of the key questions discussed by ALNAP was: How can we maintain the diversity of the humanitarian field while at the same time control the access to the donors and to the target populations? This was a collective attempt to take back control of the public image of humanitarian aid that had suffered from bad press in Goma. Stockton and Walker’s solution drew on two traditions of humanitarian aid: A tradition of reflection on the judicial or quasi-judicial rules often called “humanitarian principles,” the best-known example of which was the “Fundamental Principles” published by the Red Cross movement (1921, 1928, 1948, 1952, 1965), and the tradition of methodological reflection on aid techniques. All the large humanitarian organizations had produced their own “handbooks” for aid practitioners (WHO 1978, UNDRO 1982, UNHCR 1982, Cuny 1983, Oxfam 1985, UNICEF 1986, MSF 1997, etc.).⁶⁶ The best-known was probably Oxfam’s (which was Stockton’s NGO) about which one commentator had written: “For Christianity there is the Bible, for Islam the Koran, for Oxfam there is the *Field Directors’ Handbook*.”⁶⁷

Stockton and Walker wished to reunite these two traditions by putting together a “humanitarian chart” that would re-establish judicial norms, with a series of technical indicators for several intervention sectors (food and nutrition, water and sanitation, shelter and site, health and medical aid). But their ambition went much further: Once the Minimum Standards were published, the NGOs would have to show that they respect them (“compliance”), and they would have to register (“registry”). Their idea was to give the most binding force possible to these indicators, which would eventually be “debated and passed by the UN General Assembly” – that is, the highest decision-making body of world governance. “Once approved by the General Assembly,” they proposed, “governments could then be encouraged to integrate such standards into their national legislation.”⁶⁸ As we will see, the end result would be far from the initial promises. There would



= The Sphere Project
 = projects and arenas, in which key Sphere members played an important role (e.g. Peter Walker contributed to the Code of Conduct)
 = other codification projects

JEEAR	Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, Steering Committee: It included 20 states, 11 International organizations and 7 NGO consortiums.
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance.
Turku Declaration	Declaration of Minimum Humanitarian Standards Adopted by an expert meeting convened by the Institute for Human Rights, Åbo Akademi University, in Turku/ Åbo Finland, 2 December 1990.
Mohonk Criteria	The Mohonk Criteria for Humanitarian Assistance in Complex Emergencies, produced by the Task Force on Ethical and Legal Issues in Humanitarian Assistance. 1994
Code of Conduct	The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Nongovernmental Organisations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief, 1994.

Figure 4.2 The 1990s: A decade of competing codification projects.

Source: ©Glasman

be neither a registry nor endorsement by the UN General Assembly. There would be, however, a broad set of “universal” standards and indicators by the end of the self-set deadline of autumn 1998.⁶⁹

Starting the Sphere Project: Convincing (1996–1997)

Stockton and Walker’s first step was not to draft a set of standards. Their first step was to find allies within the NGO communities. They convinced a handful of European colleagues in Geneva (at the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response, SCHR),⁷⁰ and another handful of Americans in Washington (at the

headquarters of InterAction).⁷¹ With them, they founded a “Management Committee” with 14 representatives from NGO groups who would meet regularly in Geneva, Washington, Oxford, or Brussels.⁷²

These 14 persons represented a broad spectrum of organizations. It was a network of networks: SCHR, InterAction, ICVA, MSF, ICRC, and VOICE⁷³ were the largest non-governmental organizations involved in humanitarian aid. It was somewhat as if a group of experts attempting to rewrite the rules of sports ethics assembled FIFA, the NBA, and the NFL. The NGOs represented in this Management Committee were present in countless hospitals, refugee camps, schools, dioceses, parishes, and community centers around the world. One may think about Save the Children’s 24,000 employees; Doctors Without Borders’ 30,000 doctors, nurses and logisticians; the Salvation Army World Service Office’s 50,000 “officers” and “soldiers”; or the 450,000 employees and 17 million volunteers of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, distributed across 190 countries. The German branch of Caritas alone claims to be able to mobilize up to 617,000 employees and 500,000 volunteers.⁷⁴ Stockton and Walker thus assured themselves of a considerable relay network for their “Standards,” long before any of these standards were actually written.

Was it then time to write a draft of the Standards? Not yet. The second step was to convince the donors.⁷⁵ In 1997, several large donors gave up to 100,000 USD (Australia, Denmark, Netherlands, United States, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, ECHO).⁷⁶ The challenge for Stockton and Walker was not only to line up funding: It was rather to make the project credible by involving the maximum number of donors. But to convince the donors, compromises had to be made, as well as the first changes to the initial project. The United States Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) demanded, for example, modifications to the text of the project: The Minimum Standards must not say that catastrophe victims were “entitled” to receive assistance, because “entitlement [is a] politically loaded term in an American political context, and OFDA will not finance a project which incorporates the word in its objectives.”⁷⁷ In July 1997, two months after the presentation of the project to ALNAP, there was still no draft of the “Minimum Standards,” but the players already started to negotiate the outcome of the project.

In July 1997, Stockton and Walker’s team got to work in a small office in Geneva. Peter Walker, the project coordinator, was supported by one project manager,⁷⁸ and five “sector managers” (water and sanitation, food security, nutrition, health, shelter and site).⁷⁹ Together, they continued to the third step. Writing the Standards? Not yet! Doing publicity was more urgent. The project was given a name:⁸⁰ “Sphere,” which was meant to recall “the image of the globe.”⁸¹ Then it was given a logo. Then they produced business cards, a letterhead, a newsletter, a website, and of course the indispensable tool of the 1990s: Overhead transparencies. The Sphere Project increased the meetings with donors, telephone appeals, and visits to international conferences.⁸² Its members distributed their newsletter, sent out their “progress reports” and “press releases,” wrote articles, gave interviews, and participated in “coffee klatches” with journalists.

The message was strategically adapted to each audience: To Europeans, one spoke of human rights, but to Americans, one spoke of technical standards. An American representative of Sphere explained to Stockton and Walker: “The dogmatic approach may be viable in Switzerland. It is not acceptable here.”⁸³

The worldview from Washington is not that from Oxford and IFRC headquarters . . . We must be guided by local sensitivities in presenting the project . . . From this side of the Atlantic, this project is about identifying technical standards and best practices, not expanding international law or establishing benchmarks to be used by some authority to judge the quality of NGO work.⁸⁴

The Sphere Project’s communication strategy was carefully cultivated. One addressed “different publics” in “different manners.”⁸⁵ “The theory of diffusion of innovation” was invoked to justify the adaptation of the message.⁸⁶ Every source of support was drawn upon to convince new sources of support.⁸⁷ In the autumn of 1997, not a single “Minimum Standard” was settled nor a single chapter of the handbook drafted,⁸⁸ but the Sphere Project was already enjoying a positive image in the press.

“Furious negotiations” (1997–1998)⁸⁹

Eight months before the deadline, the time had come to write the standards. Everyone was asked to “react quite fast.”⁹⁰ The writing began. The first step was for the “sector manager” to draft a sectorial chapter. To write it, they drew on readings and on the expertise of their NGO. Secondly, they sent the draft to a small “working group,” with whom they regularly met. For example, the sector manager for the “Nutrition” chapter regularly met with eight nutritionists from large humanitarian organizations, and then solicited a “peer group” of 22 specialists via email with specific questions on the sub-themes of the chapter. Thirdly, she sent the draft to a large number of experts. The sector manager for “Nutrition,” for example, sent their text to an “e-mail group” of “103 nutrition experts from around the world” (NGO personnel, government advisers, technicians, consultants, academics, etc.). The objective was to consult the greatest possible number of experts in order to ensure the standards’ universality. “It is imperative that our document be truly global,” one manager wrote: “There should be as much input from the South as from the North.”⁹¹ However, there was a limit to this logic of inclusion: The chosen experts had to possess “the ability and willingness to communicate in English.”⁹²

In spring 1998, the Sphere team thus emailed the first drafts of the handbook to hundreds of experts all around the world. Many of the emails did not receive any response.⁹³ NGO experts were already swamped with demands of participation in competing projects.⁹⁴ Many had other, more urgent worries: Refugees from Zaire, the war in Kosovo, Hurricane Mitch. One expert based in South Sudan responded: “I don’t have time. We are in the middle of a cholera outbreak.”⁹⁵ But

Chronology of The Sphere Project¹

1970s–1990s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several aid organizations publish ‘handbooks’ for aid workers (WHO 1978, UNDRO 1982, UNHCR 1982, Cuny 1983, Oxfam 1985, UNICEF 1986, MSF 1997, etc.)² • “Providence Principles” by Weiss & Minear at Brown University³ ; • “Mohonk Criteria” by Jon Ebersole⁴ (New York)
1994	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief”⁵
1995	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR) begins field work in the Great Lakes Region. • InterAction working on a “development of Training for Private Voluntary Organizations in Complex Emergencies” (Washington)
1996	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JEEAR Teams submit drafts reports for consideration by the multi-agency Steering Committee.⁶ • “People In Aid” project is launched (London) • Nicholas Stockton (Oxfam, Head of Emergencies) and Peter Walker (IFRC, Director of Disaster Policy) draft a proposal for Steering Committee on Humanitarian Response (SCHR): “Towards Quality and Accountability Standards in Humanitarian Relief” (Geneva). • Publication of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (Copenhagen).⁷ • Nicholas Stockton and Peter Walker meet with InterAction representatives in Washington • Meeting of the ‘Management Group on Performance Standards’ of Steering Committee on Humanitarian Response (Geneva)
1997	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First ALNAP (Active Learning Network on Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action) Meeting at Oversea Development Institute (ODI) in London. • Official Launch of ‘Sphere Project’ as a joint program of SCHR and InterAction. Nicholas Stockton is Chair of the Management Committee, Peter Walker Project Coordinator, Susan Purdin is Project Manager (Geneva) • Sphere project manager sends the first draft of the humanitarian charter to the management committee and sector managers ; First meeting of Sphere sector managers in Geneva.
1998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First meetings of the Steering Committee for the Humanitarian Ombudsman Feasibility Study (London) • First drafts on the Sphere sectorial completed - chapters circulate among reviewers • Sphere regional meetings (Bangkok, Dar Es Salaam, Harare, Dacca, Nairobi, Sarajevo, Abidjan, Conakry). • First draft of the Sphere Handbook is posted on web for review • “French Letter” (Action Contre la Faim, Médecins du Monde, Médecins Sans Frontières, and group Urgence Réhabilitation Développement) express critiques of Sphere Handbook. • Nan Buzard is Sphere Project Manager • First “Trial” Edition of Sphere Handbook is published. Launch in London and Washington.

Figure 4.3 Chronology of the Sphere Project.

Source: ©Glasman

1999		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "Pilot projects" and field testing of SHERE Handbook
2000	January March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 1st final Edition of the Sphere Handbook. ● Meeting on the "Ombudsman" project at Geneva (hosted by IFRC, Oxfam GB, save the Children UK, CARE International, ICVA). End of "Ombudsman" project. Begin of "Humanitarian Accountability Project" (HAP)
2003	January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The HAP becomes Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International (HAP-I). Nicholas Stockton is Director of HAP-I
2004	January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 2nd Edition of the Sphere Handbook
2007	January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Launch of HAP 2007 Standard in Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management.⁸
2008	October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Inclusion of INEE Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Recovery as first Sphere Companion Standards.
2011		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 3d Edition of The Sphere Handbook
2018		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 4th Edition of the Sphere Handbook

Notes:

¹ The main sources for establishing this chronology have been the excellent chronologies of Margie Buchanan-Smith, John Borton & Denis Kennedy (I am thankful to John Borton for sending me this document), which I completed with the Minutes of the Meeting of the SPHERE Steering Committee which can be found at the archive of the Sphere Project in Boxes 2 and 10. (cf. Margie Buchanan-Smith, *How the Sphere Project came into Being: A case of Policy-Making in the Humanitarian Aid Sector and the Relative Influence of Research*, London 2003, ODI ; Borton , John, & Kennedy, Denis (2012), *Draft Chronology of the origins and early evolution of HAP and other Q&A Initiatives* . London: Joint Standards Initiative).

² Garb S. & Eng. E., *Disaster Handbook*, Springer, New York 1964 ; *Masefield, G.B. Food and Nutrition Procedures in Times of Disaster*, *FAO Nutritional Studies No 21, Rome 1967*; Assar, M., *Guide to Sanitation in Natural Disasters*, *WHO, Geneva 1971* ; *Cuny, F. C., Refugee Camps and Camp Planning Series, Intertext, Dallas TX 1971*; Davis, I., *Shelter after Disaster*, Oxford Polytechnic Press, Oxford 1978; *Ville de Goyet, C., The Management of Nutritional Emergencies in Large Populations, WHO, Geneva 1978* ; *UNDR0, Shelter after Disaster. Guidelines for Assistance*, United Nations, New York 1982 ; *UNHCR, Handbook for Emergencies, UNHCR, Geneva 1982* ; *Cuny, F.C., Disasters and Development*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1983 ; *Priatt, B. & Boyden J., The Field Directors' Handbook - An Oxfam Manual for Development Workers*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1985 ; *UNICEF, Assisting in emergencies. A resource handbook for UNICEF field staff, UNICEF, New York 1986* ; *Oxfam, The Oxfam Handbook of Development and Relief*, Volume 1 &2, *Taylor & Francis Ltd.*, London 1995 ; *Médecins Sans Frontières, Refugee Health. An Approach to Emergency Situations, Macmillan, London 1997* ; *UNHCR, Handbook for Emergencies*, 2nd Edition, UNHCR Geneva 2000.

³ Minear, I and T. Weiss (1993) *Humanitarian Action in time of war: A Handbook for Practitioners*. Lynne Reiner, Boulder, CO.

⁴ Ebersole Jon (1995), *The Monhok Criteria for Humanitarian assistance in complex emergencies* : Human Right Quarterly, 17(1). pp 192-208.

⁵ "Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, RNN Network Paper 7. 1994 London;(ODI)"

⁶ John Borton "doing Study 3 of the JEEAR: The team Leader's perspective" in: Wood, Apthorpe and Borton (eds) 2001, *Evaluating International Humanitarian Action: Reflections from Practitioners*. ALNAP and Zed Press, 2001

⁷ John Enksson(ed.), *Synthesis Report. The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience.*, *Steering Committee of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda*, Danida - Danish International Development Assistance/ODI, Copenhagen/London 1996

⁸ HAP. 2008. *The Guide to the HAP Standard: Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management*. London, UK: Oxfam GB.

Figure 4.3 (Continued)

Negotiating Universal Standards: The Sphere Project (May 1998)

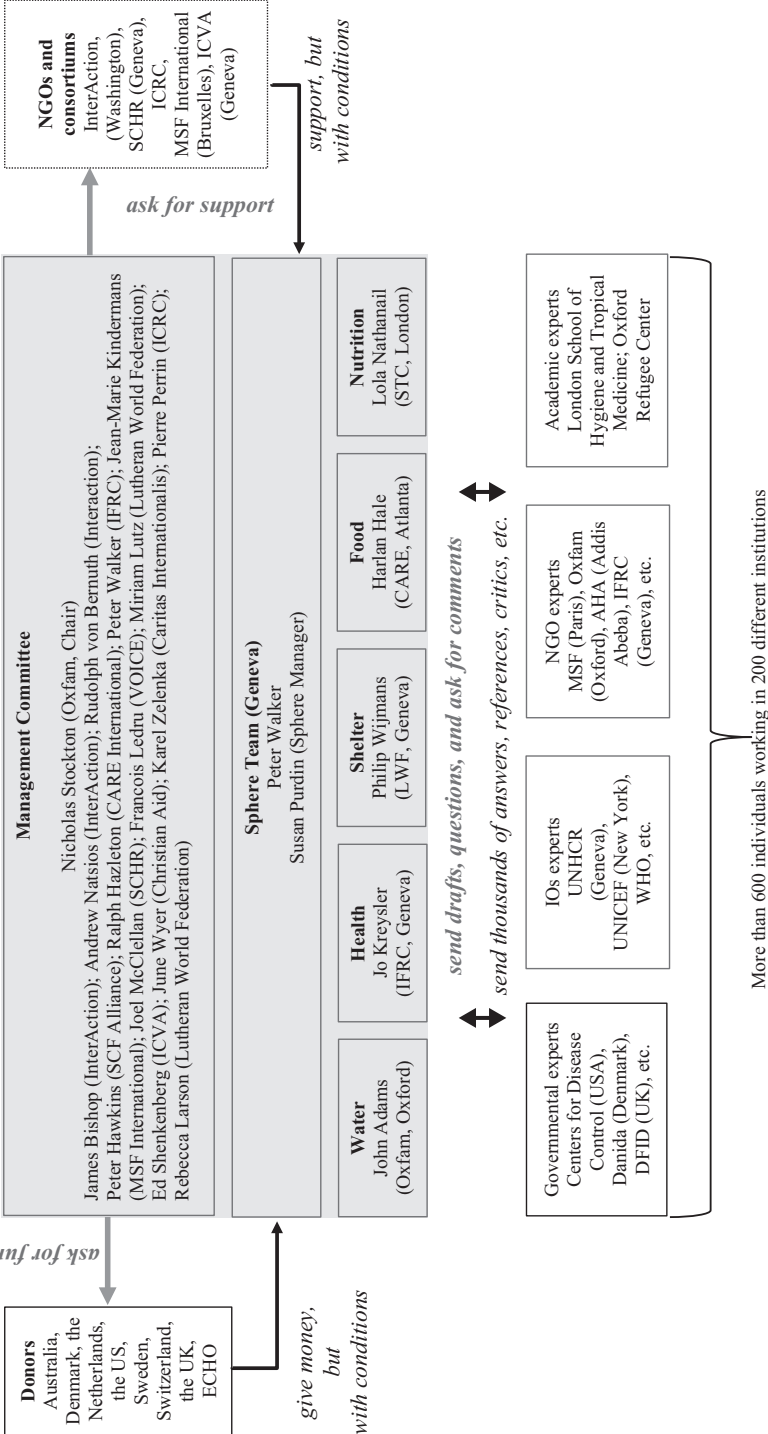


Figure 4.4 Structure of the Sphere Project (May 1998).

Source: © Glasman

others took the time to respond. Some were encouraging: “a big piece of work”; “you have done a fantastic job”; “an excellent effort”; “excellent work”; “my congratulations to the Sphere Project . . . it seems very well done”; “I support the concept which Sphere is trying to implement”; “congratulations to you!”; “In writing the document you have spoken to hundreds of people, heard a million different opinions, tried to accommodate people’s view wherever possible, and tried not to stray too far from the original objectives. It’s an almost impossible task.”

However, some experts expressed their doubts: “I have been thinking a lot about the Sphere criteria . . . I am worried,”⁹⁶ wrote a renowned nutritionist; “The standards for food aid are somewhat vague and unrealistic,”⁹⁷ wrote another. “I am a little disturbed that the key indicators are at times vague and unmeasurable,”⁹⁸ wrote a third.

Following the Sphere correspondence enables to extract oneself from the project’s teleology, and to dismantle the illusion of consensual discussions. Let us take the response of this epidemiologist, who commented on one of the first Minimum Standards documents. As one standard proposed ensuring that “at least 50% of outreach health workers are women,” he commented: “Give me a break. Don’t you think this is a little bit prescriptive?”⁹⁹ Where one standard provides for the use of “checklists,” he answered: “Can’t you just see the director of Dogood International who has completely screwed up his operation saying ‘but we used a checklist?’”¹⁰⁰ “The last thing that is needed,” he concluded, “is a document composed of fluff – this project is meant to correct a serious problem, not to make people feel better the next time something happens!”¹⁰¹ The Sphere managers collected comments that were often quite harsh: “that’s a pretty amazing statement!”; “I don’t think so”; “Is this serious or just a throwaway?”; and “I have told you that I think this is **WRONG!!!**”¹⁰²

To follow the drafts of the Minimum Standards and the commentaries is to measure the distance between the initial project and the final product; it is to perceive the doubts expressed by the experts, the possibilities discarded in discussions, and the decisions finally made by the managers. The experts discussed alternatives. What is the minimum dietary energy requirement? 1,900 kcal per person, per day was proposed. Then 2,300. Then 2,070.¹⁰³ The ICRC recommended 2,400 kcal, but the World Food Programme said 2,100.¹⁰⁴ In the end, the sector manager followed the last recommendation: The threshold was fixed at 2,100 kcal per person, per day, all the while indicating that this number was a theoretical average – it was calculated for individuals of a “sedentary population” who had a “normal demography” in an “ambient temperature above 20°C.”¹⁰⁵

For each standard evoked, a multitude of possible responses was envisioned. How much water does a human being need? One expert proposed 2–3 liters per day.¹⁰⁶ Another proposed 20 liters.¹⁰⁷ One was thinking of the quantity necessary for drinking, the other included water necessary for cooking and bathing. In many countries, a fixed indicator of 20 liters would be impossible to realize, according to one expert, who thus suggested fixing the threshold at 15 liters. This decision is typical of the trial and error experienced by Sphere: Taking an indicator high enough to incite the humanitarian actors to do better, but low enough that it had

a realistic chance of being attained. “I found,” he said, “that 50% of the countries could meet more than 15 liters a day and 50% couldn’t. That to me meant that this is where the indicator should be.”¹⁰⁸

Each decision for or against an indicator was, at the same time, a diplomatic decision for or against an organization. For example, what is the minimum space needed by a refugee living in a camp? The WHO responded: “Room for 30 m² per person excluding infrastructure.” The UNHCR responded: “a total of 150 m² per household.”¹⁰⁹ To choose an indicator meant necessarily to take sides. It was to wade into the debate among experts, among organizations, among nations: “Should we be suggesting separate standards for water collection containers and for water storage containers – as [does] UNHCR – or should we have a standard for the two together (often the same containers are used for both) – as [does] MSF?”¹¹⁰

One could believe that the indicators are *scientific* – and they are, insofar as the experts justify their positions by making reference to scientific authorities (renowned scientific personalities, universities, scientific journals). But the indicators are never *only* scientific. This does not mean that they are entirely *arbitrary*. In their decisions, humanitarian experts invoked both reason and force at once, including the arguments of academics and those of lobbyists, the opinions of researchers and those of donors. The experts were aware that the donors’ willingness to fund relief aid was limited: The Standards’ calculations took that into account. How many blankets per person? “Maybe at first only three blankets for the average family. This is not fair as the family size can differ considerably, but time and urgency and the availability decide.”¹¹¹ Some argued that “insecticide treated nets must be distributed to all families.” But others asked, “how feasible is this? Can Sphere mention *one* donor who is willing to support this cost?”¹¹² It would be equally desirable to guarantee a container of 40 liters of water to each household living in a camp. “That would be wonderful,” wrote one expert, but “can we convince the donors to support this level of cost?”¹¹³

All discussions on the content of the Standards thus engendered a balance of force and legitimacy among the institutions involved in their elaboration. For example, the weight of the role of the American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the Standards on Health was criticized by an expert: “The hand of our friends in Atlanta [CDC headquarters] is seen heavily in this section and I disagree. So do you, but you just don’t know it yet.” The vision of the world conveyed by the Standards is not neutral – it reflects the point of view of certain institutions. The same expert wrote to the Sphere managers: “You place a lot of emphasis on women’s problems. How can you if you don’t know how many women there are? I know the CDC doesn’t think gender issues are important in the emergency phase, but I do and I base my opinion on data.”¹¹⁴ The positions taken in these expert discussions never easily separate the technical and political realms. As one expert put it: “You can’t patch things together here – you have to have a clear philosophical approach and take a stand!”¹¹⁵ Setting a food diary, a minimal space for shelter, a minimal water requirement, or any threshold meant always making a choice among different institutions.

The correspondence on gender and sexuality epitomized this indivisibility of technique and politics. A member of the International Pregnancy Advisory Services writes: “reproductive health is largely absent in this document.”¹¹⁶ The question of abortion was in fact not brought up in the first draft of the Sphere Handbook. Yet the problem of “unsafe abortion” was, according to this expert, “one of the two leading causes of maternal mortality and morbidity under ‘normal’ circumstances.” What about “prenatal care” and “condom distribution”?¹¹⁷ Another expert from an American agency was astonished that the standards did not mention HIV/AIDS: “two health areas which are conspicuous in its absence,” he wrote, “are any discussion of family planning and protection against and treatment of STDs, including AIDS.”¹¹⁸ Several American NGOs insisted that sexually transmitted infections would be taken into account in the standards. But this was a divisive question.¹¹⁹ Caritas Internationalis, headquartered at the Vatican, indicated that it could not, in any case, accept the recommendation of distributing condoms.¹²⁰ The Minimum Standards eventually recommended condom distribution – but with a note at the bottom of the page specifying that Caritas did not endorse this solution.

The correspondence held in Sphere’s archives show the experts’ doubts about the whole idea of standards and codification. Why, some asked, choose only five sectors (water and sanitation, food security, nutrition, health, shelter and site)? Why not propose standards in the matters of, say, education, environment, protection against physical violence, family tracing of unaccompanied children, psychological/social care, urban agriculture, or the promotion of gender equality?¹²¹ Some standards proposed in the process were standards different from those envisioned by Stockton and Walker. “The standards describe what people should have,” one expert stated.¹²² Why not choose “an indicator that would ‘measure’ whether we are respecting the dignity and rights of the affected population,” and another “to measure whether we are addressing the potential negative side-effects of the response”?¹²³ Why not choosing indicators to measure the participation of populations receiving aid?¹²⁴ Or “standards on consultation and sharing responsibility with beneficiaries”?¹²⁵ It is not enough, one expert maintains, to provide basic services; one must guarantee “that people are not treated like cattle.”¹²⁶ These alternative standards, however, were all eventually discarded.

Can minimum standards be universal?

How universal could the minimum standards be? That was probably the most debated question. How could one be sure that the minimum standards were valid everywhere? The words used by the experts seemed to change their meaning depending on context, even the most trivial ones. “I had a phone call the other day where we spent 15 minutes talking about what we meant by ‘stove’ – a place to cook food; but it’s a three-stone fire here and a cast-iron, gas-fired device there; and it has implications for environmental impact, gender roles, health.”¹²⁷ And the problem did not stop with words. It worsens still with numbers: “[Is] setting standards based on requirement figures which are not adequately understood an

exercise in false precision?”¹²⁸ The Health Manager found it difficult to quantify needs:

In the previous draft I avoided putting figures to the objectively verifiable indicators, which I cannot do for much longer. So in this draft I have inserted figures or ranges where possible. The ranges will hopefully be narrowed down as time goes on, but some will remain, reflecting different needs in different situations.¹²⁹

Each standard set off an interminable discussion on the universality of indicators. Stockton and Walker had hoped that the minimum standards would be valid for every kind of crisis, all over the world – but the experts could not even agree on what a “humanitarian crisis” was in the first place. The classic response was to give a mortality index: Crisis was defined as the moment where the crude mortality rate (CMR) exceeded one death per every 10,000 people per day.¹³⁰ Was this definition applicable to all crises? One commentator wrote: “Crude Mortality Rate works best with camps of displaced [persons] in bad condition. But a lot of other disasters occur in the world.”¹³¹ What if populations are dispersed and one cannot calculate the CMR? If a hurricane destroys crops, its fatal consequences come about much later: “Does one wait for Crude Mortality Rates to reach 1/10,000/day before actually implementing assistance?”¹³² Should one really only need to consider the number of deaths, or equally take into account the *causes* of death? “A single cholera or yellow fever death would indicate a much more serious situation than 50 localised diarrhea deaths.”¹³³

The origin of this indicator was soon disputed: “The threshold of 1/10,000 per day is an approximate doubling of baseline CMR for most African countries at risk of refugee emergencies. This is therefore not globally applicable.”¹³⁴ Could one define a “crisis” according to the same criteria in Africa and in Europe? Could that which is a crisis somewhere perhaps be considered normal elsewhere? “We cannot expect the Sphere Handbook to address problems which are of a chronic developmental nature (i.e. ‘normally’ high CMR),” some argued.¹³⁵ So what was to be done?

Doubling of the Crude Mortality Rate as indicative of an emergency is an arbitrary indicator and not based on epidemiology. The result is that certain mortality rates will be acceptable in certain African contexts, whereas the same rates in a European context would demand a humanitarian response. Is such a relative standard acceptable?¹³⁶

The problem of defining crises was only the first in a long list of standards whose universal application is questionable. One might set the standards in Geneva, but the countries themselves have national norms that are unique to them. What to make, then, of “national standards for water treatment, vector control, drug choices, etc.”?¹³⁷ Independent of official norms, it is certain that different societies have different standards for quality of life, and likewise, the funds assigned

by donors to humanitarian interventions in different crises are different. In some cases, “the universal minimum may not be good enough,” whereas in others, the “minimum cannot be delivered.”¹³⁸ Many experts underline that “Many of the minimum standards might exceed those prevailing in the country or region of origin.”¹³⁹

Some experts proposed adopting two sets of standards: One that would apply to “industrialized countries” and one for “developing countries.” But this proposition was rapidly discarded by the Sphere team, because such a proposition would scare off donors. A representative of an American NGO explained: “dual standards which include higher levels of service for developed world disasters victims are impossible to defend politically.”¹⁴⁰

Only 13 years later, for the third edition of the handbook, Sphere resolved to integrate different integrators according to societies – classed in large regions of the world. Thus, starting in 2011, a humanitarian crisis would no longer be defined universally as a situation provoking more than one death per 10,000 per day, but rather 1.07 in sub-Saharan Africa, versus 0.46 in South Asia, 0.15 in Latin America, and 0.03 deaths per 10,000 people per day in “industrialized countries.”¹⁴¹ In other words, to be considered a “humanitarian crisis” in Africa, a catastrophe now must result in 35 times as many victims as in Europe. For the first version of the Sphere Handbook, however, the choice was made to maintain the universal standards. The whole question of the “vital minimum” was at stake: “if universal standards are in fact not universal, the very concept of ‘minimum standards’ begins to lose meaning.”¹⁴²

In order to ensure that their standards were universal, the Sphere team turned to the “field.” In March 1998 sector managers traversed Europe, Africa, and Asia, inviting representatives from NGOs, UN agencies, and national services to comment on the first drafts of the Standards. In Sarajevo, one expert complained that “the standards are too high to be achievable”;¹⁴³ in Bangkok, a participant said that Sphere has “a very Northern definition” of gender issues;¹⁴⁴ another said that the definition of crises by the crude mortality rate could not be applied to “seasonal/cyclical emergencies” (for example, those caused by monsoons). At the Sheraton Hotel in Harare, participants feared a relationship between Western and local NGOs that could be “paternalistic.”¹⁴⁵ In Dhaka, they spoke about respect for “eating habits,”¹⁴⁶ while in Abidjan, some argued for better “respect of local culture.”¹⁴⁷

The question of respecting local specificities was raised by many persons involved in the process, both in the regional meetings and in emails. The Sphere team always stood strong, arguing for the necessity of universal norms. There was, however, one notable exception.

Some experts suggested inventing standards not on *delivered* services and goods, but rather on the way the NGOs work. For them, it would be a matter of turning their gaze around: Not toward the finished product, but towards the process, the “self identification of problems of self-improvement and of self-correcting.”¹⁴⁸ Procedures, for example, to ensure that aid practitioners are properly trained, informed, and professional, that there are structures for audit and evaluation,

and that judgments are made “by peers working in the same environment under the same conditions and not against some relatively arbitrary world-wide standards.”¹⁴⁹ In fact, the Sphere team had thought about collecting standards for “Organizational Best Practices,” which was the title of a whole chapter in the very draft of the handbook.¹⁵⁰ However, this chapter raised critical questions: “how far do you think the Sphere project can go in prescribing for agencies international working, rather than their performance?”¹⁵¹ Comments noted that NGOs were much too different to submit to common rules of operation. Sphere’s first draft indicated, for example, that NGOs involved in humanitarian aid should have “balanced representation of women and men in senior management positions at headquarters and in the field.”¹⁵² One expert drily noted that such strict indicators risked never being respected: “Most agencies are such a very long way from

9.3.3. HIS standard 3 - Health Information System for Evaluation when?

Data collected monitor morbidity and mortality trends and serve to evaluate impact of program operations on diseases and health.

Key Points

- Overall mortality does not exceed $2/1,000$ per day or is double normal rate in normalized situation *2/10,000* *averaging goal.*
- Under 5 year of age mortality rate does not exceed $4/10,000$ per day or double normal rate *2/10,000*
- Maternal mortality rate does not exceed 1 per 1,000 live births
- Morbidity for priority diseases does not exceed host country norms *what are these?*
- Data on vaccine coverage, curative/injury interventions, control of diseases, water, food consumption, and sanitation are within norms for host country

9.3.4. HIS standard 4 - Health Information System

Health information system forms the basis for decisions on health care management mode. either as relief or development program ?

- Rate of new arrivals and their demographics are key data
- Identification of at-risk groups, e.g. children <5 years, pregnant and lactating women, disabled and wounded people, unaccompanied minors, at specific risks.
- Epidemiologic tools, checklists used to do assessment
- Local health program resources and external resources combine to implement ongoing health information system

Figure 4.5 Early draft of the Sphere Handbook with handwritten annotations (health chapter, December 1997).

Source: The Sphere Archives. Courtesy of The Sphere Project.

this . . . All five of Oxfam UK and Ireland's most senior managers are middle-aged white men by the way."¹⁵³

For some reasons, of all the chapters proposed in the early months of the Sphere Handbook, the chapter about the organizational best practices of NGOs was the only one to be entirely suppressed. The argument for suppressing it was that it was "too culturally specific."¹⁵⁴ Thus, the cultural differences between the societies benefiting from humanitarian aid were not considered sufficiently important to forbid generalizations on a global scale – yet the cultural differences among NGOs, by contrast, were considered too great to permit any generalization.

The “French letter” and the anti-Sphere coalition

In the summer of 1998, Stockton and Walker were almost in the position of fulfilling the promises they had made to ALNAP a couple of months earlier: The final draft of the Handbook was almost ready, and now they were discussing the cover design and distribution. A set of major public events was planned for launching the Handbook – simultaneously in Washington, London, Geneva, and Nairobi.¹⁵⁵ The member organizations, field offices, NGO partners, UN institutions, donors, and major press outlets were already informed.¹⁵⁶ The first invitations were sent, and Peter Walker could announce triumphantly in the press that, thanks to Sphere, a “new era” of humanitarian aid was dawning.¹⁵⁷

An unexpected fax changed the general mood. In September 1998 a group of French NGOs had formulated a full-frontal attack on the Sphere Standards. These five pages, that the Sphere managers would call the “French letter,” condemned the Sphere Project: With these minimum standards, it argued, “the spirit of Henry Dunant, Florence Nightingale and [. . .] hundred[s] of unknown heroes” of humanitarian aid would be “killed by a bureaucratic, normative standardization process.”¹⁵⁸

According to the French letter, the Minimum Standards would contribute to lower the quality of aid. “Who does it serve really?” it asked, “the beneficiaries? The large agencies of the Western World, or the Donors?” The French letter made three arguments: First, contrary to what the Sphere team claims, the standards were not universally applicable: “these standards seem to apply only in ideal camp situations.” But they could not apply for many types of situations, which were thought to be “much more frequent than the ideal one where Sphere recommendations can be utilized.” These standards could not apply in places where security could not be assured, resources were lacking, or people were still on the move. Thus, “most of the humanitarian situations would be excluded” from the Sphere Standards.

The second argument was that standardization did not guarantee quality. “You fix your own standards, you declare that you will use them, the fact that you use them is certified by an external auditor, you get your ISO Label and you can utilise it for advertising and fund raising. This is in no way ensuring that quality will result from the normative process.” To bureaucratic norms, the French letter opposed another definition of “real professionalism,” which required “vision, intuition, adaptability, imagination and flexibility.”

Third, the Minimum Standards were accused of ignoring the diversity of the humanitarian community. The donors could use the Minimum Standards to control the NGOs; and the NGOs from the North could use them to control the NGOs from the South. “We are concerned that our sister agencies and colleagues from the Southern and Eastern NGOs have been excluded from the process, [and] will never be able to abide by this sophisticated list of standards.”

None of these arguments were new. All arguments of the French letter were already present, in one way or another, in the email exchanges of experts involved in the Sphere process over 1997–1998. But the tone of the criticism was new. Moreover, the French letter was signed by organizations that enjoyed an excellent reputation in Europe and the United States and who the Sphere team just could not ignore. Doctors Without Borders, for instance, has considerable prestige; it was a full member of the Sphere “Management Committee,” was widely respected, and would even earn the Nobel Peace Prize a few months later. This criticism against Sphere was neither isolated nor was it solely “French.” Within the Management Committee, other organizations such as the ICRC were increasingly critical of the standards.

The criticism against Sphere soon organized in a “coalition of the refusal”¹⁵⁹ organized around MSF, Action Contre la Faim, and Groupe Urgence Réhabilitation Développement. Stockton and Walker fought back by organizing a “coalition of the willing,”¹⁶⁰ and both positions became publicly visible to donors in October 1998 at the World Aid Congress, where Peter Walker publicized the Minimum Standards while URD’s François Grünewald was distributing copies of the French letter.¹⁶¹

Walker and Stockton attempted to re-establish an apparent consensus.¹⁶² They made minor changes (“Yes”, he argues, “the Minimum Standards were written in a way that suggested they mostly applied to refugee camp situations. This has been corrected in the final version”) in order to preserve what was essential (“We believe that these standards should apply in all emergencies”).¹⁶³ They met with the leaders of MSF and eventually agreed to cancel the triumphant public launch of the handbook – and to replace it with a “debate on the meaning of standards in humanitarianism.” The publication of the final edition of the handbook was pushed back by one year. The version published in December 1998 would not be a “final edition,” but rather only a “preliminary edition.” More importantly, the idea of a “registry” was eliminated – NGOs would no longer be asked to sign this document.¹⁶⁴ For Stockton, these concessions were the “price to pay for the prospect of a much more united NGO position in support of the Sphere process overall.”¹⁶⁵

But while they were negotiating with the “anti-Sphere” coalition, they were losing support from the other side of the Atlantic:¹⁶⁶ the American partner NGOs refused to adopt the deal between Sphere and MSF. The representative of an American NGOs wrote:

Let me repeat for the record what I have told Peter and Nick by phone. There is no repeat no agreement by [our NGO] to state a debate on the Minimum Standards. No commitment should be made to MSF that there will be a debate in Washington on December 3.¹⁶⁷

The enthusiasm of the summer was gone. Mere weeks away from the public launch of the Minimum Standards, the project was close to dissolving. “As you are aware, we are now well past the 11th hour,” Stockton worried.¹⁶⁸ We are “not prepared to be bulldozed along by the process,” MSF replied.¹⁶⁹ The Sphere Project now had “a political problem.” As Stockton explained: The unity of the NGO community – especially the “clarity of the Message to Donors” was at stake.¹⁷⁰

The hurdle was to define what “universal” meant. Stockton, eager to save the standards, offered a compromise: The standards were “universal” but “the application of the standards must be tailored to each unique situation.”¹⁷¹ On the 3 December 1998, instead of a glorious book launch in four cities on three continents, a “debate” was held at the Commonwealth Conference Center in London¹⁷² in front of the donors and the press.¹⁷³ Two conceptions of minimum standards were clashing: For some, “The Sphere standards seek to be universal, applicable to all response agencies and all disasters.”¹⁷⁴ While for others, “[Humanitarian aid] is a very difficult process, not easily open to standardized or algorithmic approaches.”¹⁷⁵ For some, minimum standards would help improve the quality of aid. For others, conversely, it could be a tool for “those who wish to privatize humanitarian action so that it becomes a commodity or service product, open to subcontracting.”¹⁷⁶

Eventually, the Sphere Minimum Standards succeeded in becoming a staple reference in humanitarian aid. The Sphere Handbook was regularly updated (2000, 2004, 2011, 2018), and is today being used by hundreds of NGOs, donors, and even governmental agencies.¹⁷⁷ The Sphere standards are taught to thousands of aid workers in the field and to students in university programs.¹⁷⁸

At the same time however, the signatories of the French letter organized a veritable campaign against Sphere.¹⁷⁹ The “coalition of refusal” utilized the vocabulary of military strategy, and talked about an “offensive against Sphere,” an “opposition,” a “strategy,” and several “fronts.”¹⁸⁰ The “coalition of refusal” resisted the consensual vision of humanitarian aid that the Sphere Project provided, “the myth of ‘homogeneous humanitarians.’”¹⁸¹ This position was made possible by the fact that, unlike other NGOs that received the essential part of their funding from large public donors, MSF and their allies received most of their funds from private donations. The NGOs most critical of Sphere (Action Contre la Faim, Médecins du Monde, Médecins Sans Frontière France, etc.) had relatively small budgets in comparison with large NGOs like Oxfam or the LWF, and were specialized in specific niches, especially nutritional or medical aid, often in conflict zones and areas that were difficult to access. Yet it was precisely in these zones that were the most difficult to access (and therefore abandoned by the largest NGOs), that the standards were the most difficult to attain – hence these NGOs’ fear that setting some standards based on camp situation would make it difficult for them to act in more difficult contexts. They insisted on the importance of on-site presence, on the question of protection from physical violence, and on the legal responsibility of governments.¹⁸²

The “coalition of refusal” diffused “briefing note” and “position papers” to inform their own staff about the pitfalls of standardization¹⁸³ They asked their

staff to refuse to attend Sphere trainings that they considered being “brainwashing sessions.”¹⁸⁴ MSF and the ICRC put the brakes on the Sphere team’s work. They systematically repeated their doubts about the project.¹⁸⁵ For its part, the URD met with the Sphere Managers to influence the project and obtain concessions.¹⁸⁶ Another strategy was to go public with their criticisms. URD and MSF distributed anti-Sphere positions in all major humanitarian fora (ALNAP, VOICE, Henri Dunant Centre, etc.). In February 2000, while MSF International publicly announced that it was quitting the Sphere Project, MSF managers multiplied workshops, conferences, interviews articles, and book publications attacking standardization.¹⁸⁷ Andre Griekspoor and Steve Collins showed, for example, the case of South Sudan, where nutritional standards were able to be attained – but only by artificially reducing the number of beneficiaries of a project. The standards were attained for a small number of beneficiaries, but the less-accessible populations were ignored.¹⁸⁸ A crucial target for the anti-Sphere coalition was the donors. They sent a letter denouncing the Minimum Standards to about 100 political leaders, donors, and NGOs, ranging from the European Commission charged with humanitarian action to the director of the DFID, through the French minister of foreign affairs: “The standardization procedure,” they wrote, “could have serious operational consequences.”¹⁸⁹ They demanded that Sphere would not be considered the “quality reference” for humanitarian action.

Finally, the anti-Sphere coalition offered some counter propositions: A “Quality Hub” to develop new tools to evaluate the quality of humanitarian aid. Differently from Sphere, the “Quality Project” did not propose a series of standards on the products and services delivered to aid recipients.¹⁹⁰

The attacks of the anti-Sphere coalition paid off. The Minimum Standards were considerably weakened by the criticism: The chapter of the handbook on “best practices” was suppressed, the project of a “registry” of NGOs that adhere to the standards was abandoned, as was the idea of creating an “ombudsman” to overview NGOs.¹⁹¹ Notwithstanding these limits, the Sphere Project had a long legacy. Many projects for aid standardization that differ from Sphere exist today, including HAP (Humanitarian Accountability Partnership),¹⁹² People in Aid, and the Quality Project. However, these projects have wound up connecting with each other (notably within the context of the “Core Humanitarian Standards Alliance”) as well as with the Sphere Project. The 2018 version of the Sphere Minimum Standards thus included a chapter on “Core Humanitarian Standards” that endorsed this late alliance between Sphere and the Quality Project (that initially was created within the anti-Sphere coalition).¹⁹³

Speaking for humanity. The elementary forms of humanitarian consensus

The Sphere Project contributed to creating what the anthropologist Marion Fresia calls a “global norm”: A norm that shifts problems of political origin toward the technical and judicial fields.¹⁹⁴ But how did the Sphere team create legitimacy for a norm that, if one believes the *Handbook*, concerns the entire world population?

How could the few people that constituted the Sphere team speak in the name of humanity?

The mode of decision that Sphere employed does not resemble the mode of decision used in the scientific domain (which has been well described by the anthropology of sciences).¹⁹⁵ Even if the Sphere Project used the vocabulary of science, the arenas involved in the decision were not the scientific arenas (laboratories, peer review journals, scientific conferences, etc.). The mode of decision of Sphere also does not resemble the mode of decision employed in political decisions via the vote (there was no counting of votes in the decisions made by the Sphere Project about the indicators).

The mode of decision adopted by Sphere bears the most similarity to the model of “decision by apparent consensus” described by the sociologist Philippe Urfalino.¹⁹⁶ This decision-making model neither supposes unanimity nor a vote (that is, any technique of counting up opinions). It is a “shutdown mode of collective decision-making that, contrary to the vote, does not have the counting of opinions as a precondition.”¹⁹⁷ It is a decision-making model that is often found in specialist commissions.¹⁹⁸ The crucial point is that “consensus is not equivalent to real unanimity, but to the consent of diffident minorities” as Urfalino explains.¹⁹⁹ In other words, apparent consensus is obtained when a “final proposition, corresponding in fact to a packet of choices and expectations, does not sustain any more objections.”²⁰⁰ “Apparent consensus does not require unanimity but, on the side of those who approve, the consent of the diffident.”²⁰¹ The decision by consensus thus supposes “the manifest absence of opposition to a proposition.”²⁰²

Thereupon is the Sphere team’s tenacity in convincing the project’s detractors – including the signatories of the French letter – more understandable. In the absence of apparent legitimacy or of a higher body that could arbitrate (the Sphere team was neither elected by a group of NGOs, nor mandated by an international organization arising from nations), the Sphere team had to construct an “apparent consensus,” that is, it must proceed by “the exhaustion of acceptable objections.”²⁰³ How did the Sphere team thus seek to attain consensus? Let us have a look at four elementary forms of the construction of the consensus used by the Sphere team:

(1) The first technique was to *frame* the debate: For the Sphere team, the principal tension resided in the necessity of obtaining a large enough consensus, while keeping mastery of the content. For the Minimum Standards to be accepted as a reference tool, numerous organizations had to be involved in the process (a “broad buy-in,” in Sphere’s terms). But for the tool to keep the Sphere signature, the small team in Geneva had to keep the hand on the principal decisions. The list of “acknowledgements” listed in the Sphere Handbook depicts this particular form of collective decision-making.²⁰⁴ This list of everyone who participated in the handbook spanned 20 pages (constituting 6% of the publication).²⁰⁵ It was at once long, suggesting a decision made by a numerous assembly, a solid consensus, neutral and objective.²⁰⁶ The production of consensus was fundamental for the success of the project. The letter that accompanies the preliminary version of the handbook in 1998 pointed out:

This handbook represents the combined efforts of 641 named individuals (and countless un-named persons) drawn from some 228 organisations including NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, academic institutions, the United Nations and governmental agencies . . . [and] financial donations from 8 non-governmental networks and 10 governmental donors.²⁰⁷

In the rhetoric of the project, there was a tautology between the “consensus” represented by the Standards and the common “identity” of the actors implicated in the consensus. For the Sphere team, the project was not just a result of its contents, “it is also about forging a common humanitarian identity.”²⁰⁸ It was about “the big banana,” the “collective of NGOs.”²⁰⁹ As Nicholas Stockton put it: “‘We,’ here, is not the ICRC, Oxfam, SCF, or CARE. It is the humanitarian community at large, shorn of flags, logos, T-shirts, slogans and unusually, of hierarchy.”²¹⁰ From year to year, the Sphere team endeavored to increase the number of organizations and individuals involved in the project. In 1999, the team announced that it had obtained “feedback” through “field testing” from 5 European organizations, 6 United States organizations, 4 South Asian organizations, 3 African organizations, 1 Middle Eastern organization, and 1 Latin American organization.²¹¹ The 2004 version of the handbook even counted 4,000 individuals and 400 organizations in 80 countries.²¹²

Each individual who sent in commentary or participated in a meeting organized by Sphere was meticulously counted by the team: “it boosts the number of direct participants,” a member explained.²¹³ One of the objectives is that the leaders of the project should be able to say: “we have tried our absolute best to be as inclusive as possible.”²¹⁴ But that of course does not presume equal participation in the content. The number of participants was large, but for one thing, it did not extend to everyone (for instance, in 1998, only experts who could communicate in English were involved). For another, all the participants were not involved in the same way. At the center of the decision-making process, one found a small group of experts and NGOs that were relatively close to each other (Oxfam, IFRC, LWF, etc.).

“Framing the debate” did not concern only the extent of the conversation, but also its temporal framework. The rhythm and the “logic of the project”²¹⁵ were crucial. The “logframe” of the humanitarian project always involves a project holder, donors, a budget, an objective, and a temporal framework, a deadline.²¹⁶ This framework was a constraint, but it also offered Stockton and Walker a powerful leverage to “finalize” the debate. That is just how one of their colleagues understood it; he counseled them to end the debate by laying the criticisms of Sphere before the *fait accompli*:

I don’t think that you should spend too much time worrying about those who for the moment seem to be dropping support for Sphere. Your top priority should be to find ways of demonstrating both that Sphere works and is worthwhile in terms of improving the quality of humanitarian aid. Once this is done I suspect objections in principle will mysteriously disappear!²¹⁷

However, the logic of the project allows for better than a single ultimatum. It allows one to renew the “deadline” as a range. The Sphere Project was planned to last for one year, and to produce a “final product” in June 1998. This date was first pushed back to December 1998, then the project was renewed for a Phase II (1999), then for a Phase III, etc. This series of deadlines yielded horizons of expectation that were concrete – and extendible. As long as it had funding, the project could publish results with regular deadlines, and thus give the impression of a solid and permanent consensus.

The temporal framework of the “project” also allowed it to refer criticism *outside* the temporal limits of the project: That is, either to a later phase of the project (“this is for Phase II”), or, more often, to the prior history of the project, and thus outside the decision-making area. To defend itself, the Sphere team thus often pointed out that many decisions had already been made by others in the past; this argument was meant to put an end to the discussion by relying on a compromise already adopted by the collective: “we kept on saying that in general Sphere does not invent anything, but bases everything on existing material.”²¹⁸

(2) The second technique to reach apparent consensus was to *domesticate* the critique. The Sphere archives show that, faced with the many criticisms that the project provokes, there was no unique response, but a series of micro-strategies that sought to disarm the criticism in order to protect the core of the project. The most prevalent tactic was, as described before, confining critique to “technical” discussions. Time and time again, the Sphere team endeavored to translate political questions into technical questions – as indicated by their response to the French letter, a political criticism, but one to which it was replied: “almost all of your questions have been addressed in this final version of the Sphere standards.”²¹⁹ One of the preliminaries to this tactic was to create a detailed inventory of the critiques, in order to multiply them and to be able to deal with them one by one while remaining within the framework of the project. While some critiques, taken individually, could throw the legitimacy of the entire project into doubt (for example, the point that “Southern NGOs” had been excluded from the process), they would find themselves, within a list, “drowned” in a series of small technical points.²²⁰

This method of minimizing critique echoed the opposite technique, that of dramatization and caricature of critique, whether to make it ridiculous (French letter) or to make it too general to be taken seriously (the Sphere Project team thus sometimes ironically called itself the “Fear Project” to defuse concerns). Thus, in an article that responded to the critiques formulated by MSF and the URD, Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop created a pastiche of the critiques addressed to Sphere, concluding: The “Sphere project was not conceived to become the McDonald’s [*sic*] of humanitarianism.”²²¹

In the end, once the techniques mentioned above were no longer effective, one could always choose simply to ignore the critique, or to override it. In many instances, the experts who gave their opinions on the Minimum Standards noted that their opinions were not heeded: “Our proposal [was] not taken into account,” one of them wrote.²²² The extent of the “discussion” provoked by Sphere should

not make one forget that the drafting of the text primarily remained in the hands of the project leaders. This point is true even for sector managers, some of whom express their dissatisfaction with the final product:

In honesty S., when Anna and I read the nutrition chapter our hearts sank – it appeared that much of our careful thinking and deliberations with our working group had been overwritten in one editorial swoop. . . . [The section] does not comprehensively reflect the work of the nutrition sector . . . [This is] a product which we weren't expecting and which appears to undermine our whole approach over the last three months.²²³

(3) The third technique to obtain a consensus was to *integrate* the critiques. One of the undeniable strengths of the Sphere Project was its ability to integrate critiques to improve the final product. There again, this integration could take many forms: At several key moments, the Sphere Project was capable of inflecting the project to respond to certain critiques. For example, in the 1998 edition, the chapter on “organizational best practices” was omitted; the 2004 edition included a new chapter on “standards common to all sectors” (gender equality, children's rights, protection);²²⁴ a new chapter entirely dedicated to “protection” was integrated in the 2001 version, etc. All the same, the terms of the debate were progressively modified. The word “standards” had changed. In 1998, the phrases “standards,” “technical standards,” and “indicators” were used indistinctly from each other. In 2000, the term “standards” (whose application is universal) was distinguished from the term “indicator” (whose application is contextual, and which serves to measure the standard).²²⁵ Likewise, certain qualitative indicators were progressively transformed into quantitative indicators.

The content of the Standards thus always proceeded from the state of the balance of power at the moment of the Standards' publication. This state of affairs was particularly visible in the integration of references to the handbook, which were, also, a non-governmental diplomatic tool – it is the actors themselves who talked of “diplomacy.”²²⁶ The integration of the critique sometimes took the form of personnel management (for example, in May 2000, the Sphere team recruited “two participants from French NGO community”).²²⁷

The subtlest way of integrating critique, however, was the celebration of the culture of “debate.” Thus, in their narrative, Stockton and Walker always accord a place, admittedly minor, but always present, to criticism against Sphere.²²⁸ The official version of Sphere's story on the project's website does not neglect to mention the critiques against it. The taking into account of critique thus became a central argument of the validity of the project. For one thing, critique allowed the project to be bounced around, by organizing new meetings, new workshops, new publications, “pilot projects,” updated versions of the handbook, etc. The project was all the more visible for its sustaining of criticism and public controversy.

For another, criticism allowed the team to celebrate their ability to self-criticize and their culture of “debate”: “The Sphere Management Committee welcomes dialogue,”²²⁹ wrote Nicholas Stockton. At the height of the polemic, the defense

of the project could thus be summed up as a celebration of debate: “Hence, the debate will, and should, continue, as a genuine humanitarian community is all about debate.”²³⁰

(4) Finally, a fourth technique was to craft a *language* of consent. The work on language is a crucial element of the construction of consensus. During the first phase of Sphere, the most valued language resources were the language of science and the language of law. The language of management was present as well, in the first drafts of the project (which talked, for example, about “consumer rights” and thus identified catastrophe victims as consumers),²³¹ but that was increasingly less valued. The language of science, notably of numbers, was perceived as an important guarantor. For example, “objectively verifiable indicators” were frequently discussed.²³² Sphere’s ability to attach numbers to human necessities (2,100 kcal, 15 liters of water per person per day, etc.) was a central element of justification.²³³ At the height of the controversy about Sphere, in November 1998, a solution to the crisis was found by promoting “testing” the standards in the field, like a scientific experiment of falsification, according to the model of the “field trials” used by scientists. “Stick with the universal language of science,” one ally counseled.²³⁴ All the same, the language of science had its limits, too. On several occasions, the Sphere critics asserted that this or that number was “arbitrary,” or that the studies on this or that subject were too lacking to make an objective decision: The language of science thus was a double-edged sword.

Judicial language constituted a second asset. It is the subject of the first part of the handbook: The *Humanitarian Charter*, a summary of international laws showing that people affected by disaster had “a right to assistance.”²³⁵ All standards contained in the handbook were said to be derived from this right to assistance.²³⁶ The standards were defined as “what it takes to satisfy the legal obligations.”²³⁷ The recourse to the vocabulary of law and the invocation of binding documents like the *Geneva Conventions of 1949* and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948* were meant to lend a strong sense of legitimacy to the “Minimum Standards.” But the language of law could also be a double-edged sword: Would a document that is too juridical not be admissible in trials against NGOs or states, asked a leader of an American NGO?

Those we seek to assist are traumatized by their circumstances and many will find fault with the services provided them regardless of the standards of services delivery, because they are in shock, burdened by grief, or otherwise not their normal selves. As an American accustomed to our litigious society, you will appreciate that American agencies are unlikely to accept this language.²³⁸

This aid worker understood this position: “[Donors] would go crazy if we told them shelter was a right. Can you imagine someone suing the US State Department for human rights violations for not giving them adequate shelter?”²³⁹ Thus neither the language of science nor the language of law could satisfy the exigences of humanitarian consensus. A third resource, however, might be called a “language of ambiguity”:

I think the document should be purposively ambiguous in some of its language. This would accommodate circumstances which will be beyond the control of NGOs which subscribe to it. Ambiguity also will permit multiple interpretations of concepts likely to become *casus belli*.²⁴⁰

In the whole redaction of the Standards, here was a tension between the desire to make a document that is legible and accessible to the greatest number (“user-friendly”), on the one hand, and the desire to maintain a vocabulary that permits NGOs and donors to recognize their contribution and their sentences in the text, on the other hand. Thus, the editor of the first version of the Handbook was asked not to simplify its vocabulary too much.²⁴¹

Often I have used words to allow the contributing person or agency to recognize themselves in the document. It’s important that all agencies see themselves and can identify themselves with these standards. So apart from my Dutch English, which you must correct, you should not change too much.²⁴²

As a result, several readers complained about the ambiguity of certain terms and the difficulty of reading the document. “Even with English as a first language, I have to confess to being a bit vague about, e.g. *carrying capacity of the area, environmentally innocuous, gender disaggregated*.”²⁴³ This ambiguity, however, was not by accident. The style of the text of the Minimum Standards paid the price of crafting consensus.²⁴⁴

Conclusion

The Sphere Project has been a success, if one judges it by the number of organizations that use the Sphere Handbook as a reference. One may doubt that Sphere has opened a “new era” in humanitarian aid²⁴⁵ or even that it was “the first attempt to produce globally applicable minimum standards for humanitarian response services.”²⁴⁶ But Sphere did mark a moment in the governmentality of humanitarian NGOs. Whether they intend to apply the Minimum Standards or not, relief NGOs have to take these kinds of Standards into account – because they matter for donors, for government, for UN agencies, for other NGOs, etc. It is very difficult to estimate the real effects of the Sphere Standards on the populations receiving aid (there is a broad controversy on this, and it is not the aim of this book to take part in these discussions).²⁴⁷ In practice, many humanitarian projects are evaluated, compared, or planned along the Sphere Standards (for instance with sentences such as “70% of the Sphere Standard for the daily food ration has been attained for the population of this camp over period XY”). Thus, if the effects of humanitarian standards on the recipients of aid are not clear, the effects on NGO workers are almost certain: They have to spend time and energy to acquire competence on them – whether to implement them, or to explain why they do not.

This rise of statistical rationale in the humanitarian field took place independently from the fact that the results of the Sphere Project were rather far off from

the initial project as envisioned in the 1990s. In 1998, Peter Walker anticipated “7 steps for improving standards.”²⁴⁸ Only the first stage in his list was eventually realized: That there is a list of “Standards.” But all the instruments that should have guaranteed the application of the standards have progressively been eliminated from the initial project: The chapter on “organizational best practices” was deleted, the “registry of NGOs which are complying” was eliminated, the idea of a “complaints procedure” was abandoned, as was the idea of creating an “ombudsman” function that would have guaranteed the application of the standards.²⁴⁹ The anti-Sphere coalition led by MSF as well as other forms of critique of the project of standardization have also thus attained many of their objectives by altering the initial project.

However, and this is an important aspect, the Sphere Project and its critics share, despite their opposition, numerous common points. For Sphere’s detractors, this project constituted a “technocratic deviation” from humanitarian aid.²⁵⁰ But certain fundamentals were not the subject of doubt: For example, the idea that the improvement of aid went through a codification and a reinforcement of the humanitarian “principles” seemed largely to be shared.²⁵¹ Likewise, the idea that the goal of humanitarian aid could benefit from quantification in order to render different societies commensurable seemed largely to be shared (for example, the calculations of *mortality* and *morbidity*).²⁵² The most serious critique of the Sphere standards was thus driven, paradoxically, by a reasoning that was just as positivist and objectivist as the Sphere Project itself.²⁵³

Thus, Sphere constitutes an important moment of reflexivity in the history of humanitarian NGOs. A small group of humanitarian entrepreneurs seized control of critique of humanitarianism after Goma, and internally formulated a reflection on what Gregory Mann calls “nongovernmentality.”²⁵⁴ However, in a surprising way, this self-criticism brought its effort of reflection to bear on the image of *aid receiving individuals*, much more than on the *institutions* that structure the social world. Stockton, Walker, and their team deployed their rich reserves of energy and imagination to construct a consensus on the rights and needs of aid recipients. But they quickly ran aground in reflecting on the rights, needs, and duties of those who helped them – whether humanitarian workers or other categories of volunteers, professionals, or local functionaries who work on-site. We might live in a world in which it is easier to imagine that *essential needs* are universal than to imagine that *working conditions* could be universal. It was unimaginable, for Sphere, to pose the question of a universal salary for all NGO employees, independently of their place of work.²⁵⁵ In the world imagined by Sphere, institutions are thus surprisingly absent. Humanitarian standards invent an immediate connection between a universalist ontology, supported by a higher body and outside of society (science or the law) and individuals, taken in isolation and decontextualized (the aid beneficiaries). For example, the Minimum Standards multiply the numerical “indicators,” but without asking about the production of these numbers by different institutions, with different histories and models of calculation.

This concealment of institutions thus leads Sphere to continue to fight, 20 years after its inauguration in London, with the central contradiction between a

globalist ideology and a description of institutions. To one expert from the CDC who explains that “no exception” to compliance with Minimum Standards should be permitted, because “if they really are minimal they should be met,” another expert responds that “several organizations in the room had reported that neither they nor their overseas affiliates would be able to conform to the Minimum Standards without Project assistance.”²⁵⁶ In the end, the Sphere Project was able to respond to a crisis and material situation (the part of public humanitarian funding channeled through NGOs rose again at the end of the 1990s),²⁵⁷ but without resolving the question of its legitimacy. As one expert consulted by Sphere thus wrote: “I am uncomfortable with defining such a minimal list of good for various reasons: Who defined it? Who has the right to define it?”²⁵⁸

Notes

- 1 This meeting took place on the property of Peter Walker in Arzier-Le Muids. See Sphere Project. *The Sphere Story*. 2015-06-30. www.sphereproject.org/news/the-sphere-story-a-video-documentary/ (Accessed 2017-08-22). See also the original transcripts of the interviews contained in the Sphere archives, which contain more information than the published video version.
- 2 The project they submitted in September 1996 (as the joint project InterAction/SCHR) was entitled “Performance Standards in Humanitarian Relief.” See MSF International Archives\Box 192\Performance Standards in Humanitarian Relief. Project Proposal. Geneva, 1996.
- 3 These included Oxfam, Save the Children Fund (SCF), the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFCR), International Action by Churches Together (ACT), The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), Caritas Internationalis, and CARE International.
- 4 The United States’ Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), the European Union’s European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), and the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) recommend the use of the Sphere standards. Van Dyke, Marci and Waldman, Ronald. *The Sphere Project evaluation report*. New York: Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, 2004: 53–54.
- 5 As the Philippines and Angola, according to Van Dyke and Waldman, 2004: 38.
- 6 The first Sphere Handbook was published in 1998 (“first draft edition”), then modified and re-edited in 2000 (first edition), 2004 (second edition), 2011 (third edition), and 2018 (fourth edition).
- 7 MSF International Archives\Box 192\Performance Standards in Humanitarian Relief. Project Proposal. Geneva, September 1996.
- 8 Sphere Project. *Humanitarian charter and minimum standards in disaster response*. 1st ed. Geneva: Sphere Project 2000: 30.
- 9 Standards and indicators quoted in this paragraph are from Sphere Project, 2000: Here pages 30, 36, 47, 62, 115, 121, 147, 189, 195, 220–222, 246.
- 10 See Sphere Project. Interview with Peter Walker. 2012-10-21. <https://spherestandards.org/sphere-standards-%C2%93radical-but-inevitable%C2%94-%C2%96-an-interview-with-peter-walker/> (Accessed 2017–08–22); Sphere Project. *The Sphere Story*. 2015–06–30. www.sphereproject.org/news/the-sphere-story-a-video-documentary/ (Accessed 2017–08–22); Stockton, Nicholas. Performance standards and accountability in realising rights: The humanitarian case. Talk given at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), 17 March 1999. www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/events-documents/4083.pdf (Accessed 2017-09-26).

- 11 Buchanan-Smith, Margie. *How the Sphere Project came into being: A case study of policy-making in the humanitarian aid sector and the relative influence of research*. Working Paper 215. London: ODI, 2013: 21.
- 12 John Borton, in Sphere Project. *The Sphere Story*. 2015–06–30. www.sphereproject.org/news/the-sphere-story-a-video-documentary/ (Accessed 2017–08–22)
- 13 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Sphere Handbook Draft Internet Version, July 1998.
- 14 Sphere Project, 2004: 6.
- 15 Peter Walker, in Sphere Project. “The Sphere Story.” 2015-06-30. www.sphereproject.org/news/the-sphere-story-a-video-documentary/ (Accessed 2017-08-22).
- 16 For instance, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) guidelines on site planning, World Health Organization (WHO) estimates on food requirement, or Centers for Disease Control (CDC) data for malnutrition. See Sphere Project, 2000: 119, 147, 207.
- 17 On Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, see Chapter 1.
- 18 Sphere Project, 2004: 6.
- 19 Barnett, 2011; Ignatieff, 2004; Slim, Hugo. *Humanitarian ethics: A guide to the morality of aid in war and disaster*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- 20 This literature was produced either by the Sphere Project participants themselves, or in the framework of studies commissioned by Sphere. For overviews on the history of Sphere, see the evaluation report (this report by the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University was commissioned by the Sphere Management Committee): Van Dyke and Waldman, 2004; the article by ODI member Margie Buchanan-Smith: Buchanan-Smith, 2013; and a personal account by two of the main Sphere actors: Walker, Peter and Purdin, Susan. *Birthing Sphere*. *Disasters* 28, no. 2 (2004): 100–111.
- 21 For a parodic summary of the critique of the “neoliberal” agenda of Sphere, see Schenkenberg van Mierop, Ed, Editorial: McSphere: Franchising humanitarian aid? *The Newsletter of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA)*, ICVA Talk Back 3–3, 2001.
- 22 Brawn, Wendy. *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism’s stealth revolution*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.
- 23 The literature on the Sphere Standards was almost entirely produced by participants in the controversy about the standards. For a notable exception, see the excellent article by Margaret Satterthwaite: Satterthwaite, Margaret L. Indicators in crisis: Rights-based humanitarian indicators in post-earthquake Haiti. *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics* 43 (2011): 865–964.
- 24 One of the very first objectives of the project was “All NGOs engaged in relief provide humanitarian services according to international, interagency standards.” To achieve this, four outputs were described, not only having “Technical Standards,” but also a “Humanitarian Charter,” a “broad buy-in,” and a “widespread dissemination of Sphere documents.” See Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Email from the Sphere Project manager to project management steering committee, Weekly update, 1997.
- 25 Margie Buchanan-Smith (2003) draws on experts’ interviews: Van Dyke and Waldman, 2004, conduct interviews with 80 “key informants” and received 550 answers to their questionnaires; the Sphere Project produced a narrative on its history in a video documentary that pastes together testimonies by key Sphere actors.
- 26 Sphere Project. Interview with P. Walker, 2012.
- 27 In September 2017, the Sphere archives were kept in the basement of the International Council of Voluntary Activities (ICVA), located at 24–26 Avenue Giuseppe Motta.
- 28 Especially the email correspondence of the Sphere managers (with the Sphere Management Committee, the Sphere Project Coordinator, donors, the editor of the handbook, the sector managers, and experts’ reaction to earlier versions of the handbook).

- 29 For an analysis of the “humanitarian market,” see Carbonnier, Gilles. *Humanitarian economics: War, disaster and the global aid market*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015: 37–66.
- 30 OECD, Annexe D. Aide humanitaire. *Revue de l'ODCE sur le développement* 7, no. 4 (2006): 193–210, here p. 206. www.cairn.info/revue-de-l-ocde-sur-le-developpement-2006-4-page-193.htm (Accessed 2017-10-18). After 1997/1998, humanitarian funding rises rapidly.
- 31 Joel McClellan wrote in 1998: “Humanitarian resources are plummeting. Humanitarian spending by the world’s largest donor has fallen by 78% since 1995; food aid is down by 62% in five years; the percentage of UN consolidated appeals met by donors has decreased from 80% in 1994 to 49% in 1998.” MSF International Archives\Box 197\Seminar for non-governmental organizations on humanitarian standards and cultural differences. Geneva, 1998.
- 32 Notes on Stockton, 1999.
- 33 Of course, not all INGOs were humanitarian organizations. The exact number of INGOs depends on the definition used, but there is no doubt about the rapid rise in the 1990s. Turner, Edward A. Why has the number of international non-governmental organizations exploded since 1960? *Cliodynamics, the Journal of Quantitative History and Culture Evolution* 1, no. 1 (2010): 81–91; Nye, Joseph. *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. New York, 2004: 90; Davies, Thomas. *NGOs: A new history of transnational civil society*. London: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- 34 Duffield, Mark. Complex emergencies and the crisis of developmentalism. *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin* 25, no. 4 (1994): 37–45; Schierup, Carl-Ulrik. Prelude to the inferno: Economic disintegration and the political fragmentation of Yugoslavia. *Balkan Forum* 1, no. 8 (1993): 80–120; Roberts, Adam. Humanitarian war: Military intervention and human rights. *International Affairs* 69, no. 3 (1993): 429–449; Borton, John. *NGOs and relief operations: Trends and policy implications*. London: Overseas Development Institute, 1994.
- 35 “The Sphere Project is undoubtedly also about re-establishing the legitimacy of the humanitarian system.” Stockton, Nicholas. Performance Standards and Accountability in Realising Rights: The Humanitarian Case, *Talk given at ODI*, Wednesday 17 March 1999.
- 36 The figures were broad estimates which have been highly debated. See Prunier, Gérard. *The Rwanda crisis, 1959–1994, history of a genocide*. London: Hurst, 1995; Des Forges, Alison, Human Rights Watch, and International Federation of Human Rights. *Leave no one to tell the story: Genocide in Rwanda*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999; Lemarchand, René. *The dynamics of violence in Central Africa*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009; Guichaoua, André. *Rwanda, de la guerre au génocide. Les politiques criminelles au Rwanda (1990–1994)*. Paris: La Découverte, 2010.
- 37 Borton et al., 1996: 41.
- 38 Between April and December 1994, 1.4 billion USD were spent on humanitarian action for Rwandese refugees: See Borton, John. The joint evaluation of emergency assistance to Rwanda. *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine* 26, (2004). The British and American governments, criticized for having done nothing to stop the genocide, put their military logistics teams in the service of the NGOs.
- 39 Hilsum, Lindsey. Reporting Rwanda: The media and the aid agencies. In *The media and the Rwanda Genocide*, Thompson, Allan (ed.). London and Kampala: Pluto Press, 2007: 167–187.
- 40 Dowden, Richard in *The Independent on Sunday*, quoted by Hilsum, 2007: 181.
- 41 Satterthwaite, Margaret L., Indicators in Crisis: Rights-based humanitarian indicators in post-earthquake Haiti. *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*, 43 (2011): 865–964.
- 42 Anne Marie Huby, former executive director of MSF-UK, quoted by Hilsum, 2007: 169. On sanitary conditions in the refugee camps: Goma Epidemiology Group.

- Public Health impact of Rwandan refugee crisis: What happened in Goma, Zaire, in July 1994? *The Lancet* 345, no. 8946 (1995): 339–344; Les Roberts and Toole, Michael. Cholera deaths in Goma. *The Lancet* 346, no. 8987 (1995): 1431.
- 43 Joel Boutroue, the head of the UNHCR sub-delegation in Goma, spoke of “dozens of NGOs we didn’t want” (quoted by Hilsum, 2007: 175).
- 44 Biberson, Philippe. Pourquoi nous quittons le Rwanda, Ouest-Franc, 1994. quoted in Bradol, Jean-Hervé and Le Pape, Marc. *Génocide et crimes de masse. L’expérience rwandaise de MSF 1982–1997*. Paris: CNRS Edition, 2017: 115.
- 45 On the internal debate at MSF between November 1994 and August 1995, see Bradol and Le Pape, 2017: 114–119. The first unit to leave the camps was MSF France. In August 1995, all of the MSF units (Belgium, Netherlands, etc.) left the camps.
- 46 On the manipulation of humanitarian aid in Rwanda, see Terry, Fiona. *Condemned to repeat? The paradox of humanitarian action*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002. See also: Uvin, Peter. *Aiding violence: The development enterprise in Rwanda*. West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1998; Lischer, 2005.
- 47 MSF France. *Pourquoi nous quittons les camps de réfugiés rwandais*. MSF Newsletter, 1994.
- 48 Hilsum, 2007: 177.
- 49 For instance, MSF was harshly criticized by the French government, because the organization had criticized France’s Opération Turquoise (Hilsum, 2007: 175).
- 50 Bonner, Raymond. The World: Post-mortem for charities: Compassion wasn’t enough in Rwanda. *The New York Times*. 1994–12–18.
- 51 Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States, Commission of the European Union, the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN’s Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UNHCR, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), WFP, World Health Organization (WHO), International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), IFRC, ICVA, Doctors of the World, InterAction, Steering Committee of Humanitarian Response (SCHR), and Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies (VOICE). France left the Steering Committee of the JEEAR in December 1995. On the history of the JEEAR, see Buchanan-Smith, 2003; Dabelstein, Niels. Evaluating the international humanitarian system: Rationale, process and management of the joint evaluation of the international response to the Rwanda genocide. *Disasters* 20, no. 4 (1996): 287–294; Borton, John. Doing study 3 of the joint evaluation of emergency assistance to Rwanda: The team leader’s perspective. In *Evaluating international humanitarian action: Reflections from practitioners*, Wood, Adrian, Apthorpe, Raymond, and Borton, John (eds.). London: Zed Books and ALNAP, 2002.
- 52 Five governmental agencies (from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the United Kingdom, and the United States) conducted the evaluation process. The most important part of the evaluation concerned humanitarian aid; it was conducted by John Borton of the ODI (United Kingdom). Borton, John et al. (eds.). *The international response to conflict and genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda experience*. Study 3: Humanitarian aid and effects, London: DANIDA and ODI 1996.
- 53 Borton et al., 1996: 88; Hilsum, 2007: 175.
- 54 Borton et al., 1996: 196.
- 55 Borton et al., 1996: 59.
- 56 OFDA/USAID (United States Agency for International Development). *Monitoring project* (United States); ODA/DFID *Humanitarian Guidelines* (United Kingdom); SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) *Humanitarian Assistance Guidelines* (Sweden); European Court of Auditors *Report on Humanitarian Aid* (European Union 1992–1995); OECD-DAC *Evaluation study*; UN *criteria for implementing partners*;

- Accreditation programs of the International Labor Organization (ILO); Accreditation programs of the Food and Agriculture Organization; Accreditation programs of the WHO; UNHCR's partnership agreements with NGOs; status of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) *Review process*, etc.
- 57 The term "ombudsman" referred to a traditional Swedish institution. The ombudsman is an official who investigates complaints against the administration on behalf of the public, for reasons such as rights violation. In other countries, this function is called a public advocate, inspector general, parliamentary commissioner, or citizen advocate.
- 58 Declaration of Minimum Humanitarian Standards. Adopted by an expert meeting convened by the Institute for Human Rights, Åbo Akademi University in Turku, Finland, 2 December 1990.
- 59 Minear, Larry and Weiss, Thomas G. *Humanitarian action in times of war: A handbook for practitioners*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993.
- 60 Ebersole, Jon. The Mohonk criteria for humanitarian assistance in complex emergencies. *Human Rights Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1993): 192–208.
- 61 The code was eventually published in 1997: People in Aid. *Code of best practice in the management and support of aid personnel*. First published by Rural Reconstruction Nepal, London: (RRN)/ODI, 1997.
- 62 The Code of Conduct was originally an initiative by IFRC and Oxfam – the same organizations that initiated the Sphere Project. Relief and Rehabilitation Network. See Walker, Peter. Cracking the code: The genesis, use and future of the Code of Conduct. *Disasters* 29, no. 4 (2005): 323–336. The Code of Conduct was edited by several of the members of the Committee (including Peter Walker) and published by the ODI (led by the team leader of Study 3, John Borton).
- 63 Composed of 30 representatives of nations, UN institutions, and NGOs. Minutes of the Meeting of ALNAP, London, 1–2 May 1997.
- 64 Blair reformed the Overseas Development Administration, which became the Department for International Development (DFID), led for the first time by a Secretary of State, Clare Short. See the following report: DFID. *Eliminating world poverty: A challenge for the 21st century*. White Paper on International Development, Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State of International Development, 1997. See DFID. Key principles for a new humanitarianism, 1998. See also: Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Keynote Address by Clare Short, MP, Secretary of State of International Development (United Kingdom) to the ECHO/ODI Conference on 'Principled Aid in an Unprincipled World, London, 7 March 1998.
- 65 DFID, 1997: 10, paragraph 1.7.
- 66 Garb, Solomon and Eng, Evelyn. *Disaster handbook*. New York: Springer, 1964; Masefield, Geoffrey B. *Food and nutrition procedures in times of disaster*. Rome: FAO Nutritional Studies, 1967; Assar, Mohammad. *Guide to sanitation in natural disasters*. Geneva: WHO, 1971; Cuny, Frederick C. *Refugee camps and camp planning series*. Dallas: Intertect, 1971; Davis, Ian. *Shelter after disaster*. Oxford Polytechnic Press, 1978; Ville de Goyet et al., 1978; UNDRO. *Shelter after disaster: Guidelines for assistance*. New York: United Nations, 1982; UNHCR, *Handbook for Emergencies*, UNHCR, Geneva 1982; Cuny, F.C., *Disasters and development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983; Pratt, B. and Boyden, J., *The field directors' handbook: An Oxfam manual for development workers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985; UNICEF, *Assisting in emergencies: A resource handbook for UNICEF field staff*. New York: UNICEF, 1986; Oxfam, *The Oxfam handbook of development and relief*, vols. 1 and 2. London: Taylor & Francis Ltd., 1995; Médecins Sans Frontières, *Refugee health: An approach to emergency situations*. London: Macmillan, 1997; UNHCR. *Handbook for emergencies*, 2nd ed. Geneva: UNHCR, 2000.
- 67 Byrne, Hugh. Review of the field director's handbook: An Oxfam manual for development workers. In Pratt, Brian and Boyden, Jo (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985: 512. *Community Development Journal* 21, no. 3 (1986): 239–240.

- 68 Minutes of the Meeting of ALNAP, London, 1998-05-7/8.
- 69 The first deadline was June 1998. Minutes of the Meeting of ALNAP, London, 1997-10-21/22.
- 70 The SCHR was created in 1972 by Oxfam, IFRC, the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, and the Catholic Relief Service. MSF joined in 1997, the ICRC joined in 1999.
- 71 In April 1996. InterAction was a American umbrella organization of 180 NGOs. InterAction was working on its own project of standardization in food security, water, and sanitation, financed by the Ford Foundation. In June 1995, InterAction had submitted a proposal to the United States Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) for the “Development of Training for PVOs in Complex Emergencies”. This led to a project founded by the Ford Foundation to develop an NGO Field Cooperation Protocol.
- 72 In 1996 and 1997, it was called the “Standards Project Management Team,” then the “Management Committee” after July 1997. See Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Minutes of the 2nd Meeting of the standards Project Management Team. Geneva, 26 June 1997.
- 73 ICRC and Voice had an “observer” status.
- 74 www.ifrc.org/en/what-we-do/volunteers/global-review-on-volunteering/; www.savethechildren.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/our-leadership/staff-and-volunteers; www.caritas-germany.org/aboutus/servicesandstaff/servicesandstaff.aspx; www.doctorswithoutborders.org/our-work/how-we-work/types-of-projects (Accessed 2017–10–11).
- 75 Each participating organization of the Management Committee had to contribute 15,000 USD per year. The first transfers arrived in Autumn 1996. Archives\Box 10\Minutes of the Sphere management committee meeting. Washington, 27 October 1997.
- 76 For Phase I of Sphere (January 1996–November 1998), the project has received 663,686 CHF [ca. €604,321]. For Phases I and II (1996–2000), Sphere cost ca. 2.5 million CHF [2.27 million €]. Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Phase II financial and narrative final report. 1 November 1996–31 October 2000.
- 77 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Email from JB to PW, 7 July 1997.
- 78 Susan Purdin (July 1997–July 1998), then Nan Buzard (1998–2000).
- 79 Peter Walker and Susan Purdin worked in Geneva (at the Ecumenical Centre and the headquarters of the IFRC), while the “sector managers” worked at the headquarters of the NGOs for which they normally worked. (At the headquarters of Oxfam, in Oxford, for the “water and sanitation manager”; at the headquarters of CARE in Atlanta for “food security”; at the headquarters of Save the Children in London for “nutrition”; at the headquarters of the Lutheran World Federation for “shelter and site” in Geneva; and at that of the ICRC, also in Geneva, for “health.”)
- 80 “The multi-agency character of the beast” can be confusing,” we need to use “one name.” Sphere Project Archives\Box 24\Email from the Sphere project manager to project management steering committee. Weekly update, 19 September 1997.
- 81 Sphere Project, 2015 (Video).
- 82 The World Aid Conference, held in Geneva in 1998, was an important moment of diffusion for Sphere.
- 83 Sphere Project Archives\Box 24\Email from JB to SP, 28 August 1997.
- 84 Sphere Project, 28 August 1997.
- 85 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Email from the Sphere Project Manager to Project Management Steering Committee, Weekly update, 19 December 1997.
- 86 Sphere Project, 19 December 1997.
- 87 Including the Secretary General of the UN, who was written to –his answer was published in the Sphere Newsletter: “Kofi Annan lauds Sphere Project.” Archives\Box 10\Email from the Sphere Project Manager to project management steering committee. Weekly update, 31 July 1997.

- 88 The handbook was not even called a handbook yet, but simply “The product of the project.” Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Email from the Sphere Project Manager to project management steering committee. Weekly update, 1 July 1997.
- 89 The expression was used by Nicholas Stockton in Sphere Project, 2015 (Video).
- 90 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Progress Report for Sphere Project second quarterly report. Water Supply and Sanitation Report, 19 January 1998.
- 91 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Email from the Sphere Project manager to project management steering committee. Weekly update, 1 July 1997.
- 92 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Nutrition sector quarterly report, October–December 1997.
- 93 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from JB to PW, 14 July 1998.
- 94 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Progress report for Sphere Project second quarterly report. Water supply and sanitation report, 19 January 1998.
- 95 Quotes from various emails and faxes. See Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from MO to SP, 16 July 1998; Comments on the draft by JA, Jan. 1998; Email from MO to SP, 16 July 1998; email from HW to IM, 15 July 1998; Fax from SD to PW, 22 July 1998; Email from CL to SP, 4 June 1998; Email from CK to SP, 7 March 1998; Email from LB (MSF Holland) Sphere Management, 13 July 1998; Email from RW to JR, 10 June 1998.
- 96 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from MG to LG et al., 9 March 1998.
- 97 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Mail from HW to IM, 15 July 1998.
- 98 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Mail from RW to JR, 10 June 1998.
- 99 *Ibid.*
- 100 *Ibid.*
- 101 *Ibid.*
- 102 Emphasis in original. Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Mail from RW to JR, 10 June 1998.
- 103 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Progress Report for Sphere Project Second Quarterly Report. Nutrition Sector Quarterly Report, October–December 1997.
- 104 Sphere Handbook, 2000: 148.
- 105 This number is an estimation of average needs, as a function of a “normal demography” (12% of below 5, 32% aged 5–19 years, 49% of 20–59 years and 7% over 59 years). Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Progress Report for Sphere Project Second Quarterly Report. Nutrition Sector Quarterly Report, October–December 1997.
- 106 The first draft with a quantification for water gave a range: “7–20 litres of water per person per day, average collection time less than 15–30?? [sic] minutes per 10L” Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Minimum Standards for Water Supply and Sanitation in Emergencies, Revised Draft, 16 December 1997. By JA.
- 107 An expert suggested between 7 and 20 liters. Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Comments on the draft by JA, January 1998.
- 108 Interview No. 7, quoted by Satterthwaite, 2011: 922.
- 109 55 m² for the family plot, including space for gardening. Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Progress Report on the Sphere Sector: Shelter and Site, December 1997.
- 110 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Minimum Standards for Water Supply and Sanitation in Emergencies, Revised Draft, 16 December 1997.
- 111 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Fax from PW to IM, 2 May 1998.
- 112 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Mail from HW IM, 15 July 1998.
- 113 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Mail from HW to IM, 15 July 1998.
- 114 He suggests including an estimate of female heads of household and an estimate of pregnant women. Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Mail from RW to JR, 10 June 1998.
- 115 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Mail from RW to JR, 10 June 1998.
- 116 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from International Pregnancy Advisory Services (IPAS) to JK, 6 July 1998.
- 117 Recommendations by The Inter-Agency Working Group on Refugee Reproductive Health (IAWG) and the Reproductive Health for Refugees Consortium (RHR).

- Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from International Pregnancy Advisory Services (IPAS) to Joachim Kreysler, 6 July 1998.
- 118 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from CL to SP, 4 June 1998.
- 119 Sphere Project, 4 June 1998.
- 120 “It should be noted that Caritas Internationalis members cannot endorse Guidance nr 7 of the Control of Communicable Diseases section dealing with condoms.” Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meetings, Geneva, 22–24 September 1999.
- 121 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Comments on the draft by JA, January 1998; Email from HW to IM, 15 July 1998; Email from JS to NS, 26 March 1998; Fax from SD to PW, 22 July 1998; Email from HW to IM, 15 July 1998; Email from HW to IM, 15 July 1998.
- 122 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Sphere Quarterly Report Number Two, p. 2, January 1998.
- 123 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from HVH to SP, 17 March 1998.
- 124 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Mail from HW to IM, 15 July 1998.
- 125 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from HVH to SP, 17 March 1998.
- 126 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Comments on the draft by JA, January 1998.
- 127 Sphere Project Archives\Box 24\Email from the Sphere Project Manager to Project Management Steering Committee, Weekly update, 19 June 1998.
- 128 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Progress Report for Sphere Project Second Quarterly Report. Nutrition Sector Quarterly Report, October–December 1997.
- 129 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Minimum Standards for Water Supply and Sanitation in Emergencies, Revised Draft 16 December 1997. By JA.
- 130 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from CK to SP, 7 March 1998.
- 131 Sphere Project, 7 March 1998.
- 132 “Using Crude Mortality Rates seems to suggest (incorrectly) that one should wait until things get bad before taking action. But if you intervene early how do you judge your efforts against the Sphere standards?” . . . “Sphere might better take a wider view of what constitutes a disaster (the work of sociologists is illuminating in this respect).” Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from Charles Kelly to Susan Purdin, 7 March 1998. The indicator eventually used in Sphere is: “one way of knowing if the response is succeeding is when the Crude Mortality Rate (CMR) falls appreciably or when the Under Five Mortality Rate (U5MR) drops to less than 2 per 10,000 per day and has stabilised. A further measure may be the absence of ‘distress migration’” [p. 2] Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Sphere Handbook draft, March 1998.
- 133 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from LG to SP, No Date [spring 1998].
- 134 *Ibid.*
- 135 *Ibid.*
- 136 *Ibid.*
- 137 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Comments on the draft by JA, January 1998.
- 138 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Comments on the draft by JA, January 1998.
- 139 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Mail from HW to IM, 15 July 1998.
- 140 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Email from JB to PW, 7 July 1997.
- 141 Sphere Project, 2011: 311.
- 142 Satterthwaite, 2011: 926.
- 143 Sphere Project Archives\Box 24\Regional Meeting in Sarajevo, 16 March 1998.
- 144 Sphere Project Archives\Box 24\Regional Meetings in Bangkok, 3 March 1998.
- 145 Sphere Project Archives\Box 24\Regional Consultations Eastern and Southern Africa, March 1998.
- 146 Sphere Project Archives\Box 24\Regional Meeting Dhaka, Bangladesh, 9 March 1998.
- 147 Sphere Project Archives\Box 24\Sphere Presentation in Ivory Coast, March 1998.
- 148 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from MG to LG et al., 9 March 1998.

- 149 Sphere Project, 9 March 1998.
- 150 (“logical Framework,” “analysis,” etc.) as well as a definition of challenges common to all sectors (“coordination,” “participation,” “accountability,” “protection,” “security,” “environment,” “gender integration,” etc.) Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Drafts of the Organizational Practices, January–June 1998.
- 151 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Comments on the draft by JA.
- 152 *Ibid.*
- 153 *Ibid.*
- 154 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from JR and PW to CP (URD), 13 September 1998.
- 155 Sphere Project Archives\Box 24\Email from the Sphere Project Manager to Project Management Steering Committee, Weekly Update, 19 June 1998.
- 156 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Email from NC, Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response at IFRC to SP et al., 30 June 1998.
- 157 Walker, Peter. Le projet Sphere: Une nouvelle ère dans les secours d’urgence. *Revue des questions humanitaires*, no. 2 (1998).
- 158 All quotes from the “French letter”: MSF International Archives\Box 197\Fax by Action Contre la Faim, Institut de l’Humanitaire, Médecins du Monde, Médecins Sans Frontière France and Groupe Urgence Réhabilitation Développement to the Sphere Project, Paris, 10 September 1998.
- 159 MSF International Archives\Box 195\Mail from FD (MSF-Paris) to MSF International, 19 February 2001.
- 160 An expression used by Nicholas Stockton: Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meeting, London, 10 November 1998.
- 161 MSF International Archives\Box 197\Email from FG to signatories of the Letter of the 10th September, 4 October 1998.
- 162 See later in the chapter for the notion of “apparent consensus.”
- 163 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from PW (Sphere) to CP (URD), 13 September 1998. Peter Walker also asked Jean Roy, the Health Sector Manager, to respond to the technical points (vaccination, period of emergency, etc.).
- 164 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Email from NS to the SCHR, 22 October 1998.
- 165 *Ibid.*
- 166 Stockton also sent the members of the Steering Committee a “draft” of a letter that was meant to accompany the publication of the preliminary handbook, which defined the status of the handbook and the “period of trial” in 1999, announced the “debate” on 3 December 1998, and clarified: “we recognize that the Sphere Project has been conducted within an era dominated by mass refugee and IDP flows and humanitarian response practice has been shaped by this experience.” See Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Letter by NS to the Steering Committee, October/November 1998.
- 167 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Email from JB to SCHR, 23 October 1998.
- 168 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Email from NS to SCHR, 22 October 1998.
- 169 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meeting, London, 10 November 1998.
- 170 As he explained, “Money had to be raised for Phase 2,” e.g. 300,000 USD from the US government. Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meeting, London, 10 November 1998.
- 171 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Letter from NS to the signatories of the Letter of the 10th September, 24 November 1998.
- 172 The same day, a plenary meeting took place in Washington, to inform the donors: Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Minutes of the Plenary Meeting of DRC, Washington, 3 December 1998.
- 173 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Conference Report 3 December 1998 at Commonwealth Conference & Events Center High Street Kensington, London W8.

- 162 *Standards: The Sphere Project and the universalization of the minimum after Goma*
- 174 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Conference Report 3 December 1998, Remarks by George Weber, Secretary General IFRC.
- 175 Orbinski, James. On the meaning of Sphere standards to states and other humanitarian actors. Lecture delivered in London on December 3, 1998, Médecins Sans Frontières 1998. www.msf.fr/sites/default/files/1998-12-03-Orbinski.pdf (Accessed 2017-08-30).
- 176 Orbinski, 1998.
- 177 Satterthwaite, 2011: 878.
- 178 For instance, the Joint European Master Program in Humanitarian Assistance “NOHA” (Network On Humanitarian Assistance”), taking place in seven European universities (France, Malta, The Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Ireland, Poland, Sweden), has organized crash courses on the Sphere Standards.
- 179 MSF International Archives\Box 195\Mail from FD (MSF-Paris) to MSF International, 19 February 2001.
- 180 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meeting, London, 10 November 1998; MSF International Archives\Box 195\Email from FD (MSF-Paris) to MSF International, 7 May 2001; MSF International Archives\Box 195\Mail from FD (MSF-Paris) to MSF International, 19 February 2001.
- 181 Tong, Jacqui. Questionable accountability: MSF and Sphere in 2003. *Disasters* 28, no. 2 (2004): 176–89, here p. 177.
- 182 Orbinski, 1998.
- 183 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\ICRC’s Position on the Sphere Project, internal briefing note by PP [chief medical officer], 14 December 1998; MSF International Archives\Box 195\Position de Médecins Sans Frontières sur Sphere, le médiateur humanitaire, les codes de conduites et les strategic framework [no date/2000].
- 184 MSF International Archives\Box 195\Email from FD (MSF-Paris) to MSF International, 7 May 2001.
- 185 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meeting, 7 January 1999, Geneva; Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meeting, 22–24 September 1999, Geneva; Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meeting, Washington, DC, 18–19 May 1999; Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meeting, Brussels, 9–10 February 2000. Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Sphere Report for the 18–19 May 1999 Management Committee Meeting, Washington, DC. Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meeting, Brussels, 9–10 February 2000.
- 186 Many meetings took place between the signatories of the French letter and the Sphere team in May 1999. MSF International Archives\Box 195\Compte-rendu de la réunion du 5 mai 1999 à Paris, entre staff du Sphere Project et ONG françaises.
- 187 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meeting, Brussels, 9–10 February 2000. Terry, Fiona. The limits and risks of regulation mechanisms for humanitarian action. *Humanitarian Exchange*, no. 17, London: ODI, 2000; Dubuet, Fabien What is humanitarian accountability? *ICRC Forum*, March 2002, www.msf.fr/sites/www.msf.fr/files/2002-04-01-Dubuet.pdf (Accessed 2017-08-30); Tong, 2004; Vila SanJuan, Rafael. Letter sent to missions, MSF Position vis à vis the Sphere Project, 25 March 2003; MSF International Archives\Box 195\Plaintes sur Sphere et Ombudsman (by Jean Marie Klinmann, 25 June 2000; Dufour, Charlotte et al. Rights, standards and quality in a complex humanitarian space: Is Sphere the right tool? *Disasters* 28, no. 2 (2004): 124–141. Groupe URD. Les dangers et incohérences des approches normatives pour l’action humanitaire. La Fontaine des Marins, December 1999; Conférence Etikuma 99: Les codes de conduite: Référence éthique et gage d’efficacité pour les actions humanitaires internationales du IIIème Millénaire ? Bioforce & Université Paris I Sorbonne, Septembre 2000. Special

- Issue of Journal Humanitaire (Médecins du Monde & Institut Humanitaire), Faut-il normaliser l'aide humanitaire?, November 2000.
- 188 “The Sphere nutritional key indicators emphasize individual cure rates rather than overall impact at the population level” (Griekspoor, A., and Collins, S. Raising standards in emergency relief: How useful are Sphere minimum standards for humanitarian assistance? *BMJ*, 323, no. 7315 (2001): 740–742, here p. 740).
- 189 MSF International Archives\Box 193\Lettre envoyée par la “Plate-Forme Qualité” aux bailleurs, décideurs politiques, etc. Paris, 15 February 2001.
- 190 However, the “project qualité” took up some of the Sphere Project’s ideas – including the inspiration of the ISO-9000 model. Groupe URD. “Did someone say quality? Contribution to a debate.” *The quality project: Reflections on the method*. Plaisians: URD, 2002. For a concise explanation on the difference between Sphere and the Quality Project, see Hilhorst, Dorothea. Being good and doing good? Quality and Accountability of humanitarian NGOs. *Disasters* 26, no. 3 (2002): 193–212.
- 191 “Following in-depth research,” the Humanitarian Ombudsman Project “recognized that an international Ombudsman was not a realistic approach to accountability problems in the international humanitarian sector.” “Ombudsman’ systems,” it was concluded, “were only effective in societies with well-established public services and fair, effective and accessible judicial systems” (HAP, quoted by Satterthwaite, 2011: 887–88).
- 192 The HAP “Standards in Accountability and Quality Management,” as opposed to the Sphere Standards, did not have to do with the services and products supplied to the beneficiaries (*substantive standard*), but rather to the process, the functioning of the NGO, the formation of a staff (*process standards*), with the “Humanitarian Quality Management Benchmarks.” The 2010 HAP Standard in Accountability and Quality Management, Geneva, 2010.
- 193 Sphere Project. Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Relief. 2018 ed. (2nd draft, October 2017), chapter “Core Humanitarian Standards.”
- 194 Fresia, Marion. La fabrique des normes internationales sur la protection des réfugiés au sein du comité exécutif du HCR. *Critique internationale* 54 (2012): 39–60.
- 195 The decision-making model used by Sphere also did not resemble the veridiction model characteristic of the Law. For a point-to-point comparison of the mode of veridiction in the sciences and in law, see Latour, Bruno. *La fabrique du droit. Une ethnographie du conseil d’Etat*. Paris: La Découverte, 2004: 207–260.
- 196 Urfalino, Philippe. La décision par consensus apparent. Nature et propriétés. *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* 45, no. 136 (2007): 47–70.
- 197 Urfalino, 2007: 48.
- 198 For two case studies, see Pasquino, Pascale and John Ferejohn. Constitutional adjudication: Lessons from Europe. *Texas Law Review* 82, no. 7 (2004): 1671–1704. And: Hauray, Boris. *Contrôler les médicaments dans un espace européen. Politique, expertise et influence des firmes*. Paris: Presse de Sciences-Po, 2005.
- 199 Urfalino, 2007: 54.
- 200 Urfalino, 2007: 55.
- 201 Urfalino, 2007: 57.
- 202 Urfalino, 2007: 59.
- 203 Urfalino, 2007: 65.
- 204 For example, the “umbrella” organizations are counted along with the number of participating organizations: ICVA (81 ONGs), VOICE (73), Interaction (154), SCHR (8).
- 205 For comparison, the *Humanitarian Charter* took up four pages, and the standards and indicators 259 pages. Sphere Project. Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response. 1st final ed., 2000.
- 206 This situation furthermore corresponds to Urfalino’s definition of apparent consensus: He suggested an “equality of participation” but an “inequality in fact” of the

- different weights in the decision-making process, i.e. a “recognition of the inequality of influence.” Urfalino, 2007: 67.
- 207 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Letter by NS to the Steering Committee, October/November 1998.
- 208 Sphere Project, 2015. This notion of a “common identity” of humanitarian actors comes back in several interviews of “The Sphere Story.”
- 209 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meeting, 30–31 May 2000.
- 210 Notes on Stockton, Nicholas. Performance standards and accountability in realising rights: The humanitarian case. Talk given at ODI, 17 March 1999. www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/events-documents/4083.pdf (Accessed 2017–09–26).
- 211 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Lessons Learned, Sphere Implementation Team October 2000.
- 212 Satterthwaite, 2011: 892.
- 213 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Email from SJ to NS, 15 October 1998.
- 214 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Letter from NS to the signatories of the Letter of the 10th September, 24 November 1998.
- 215 On the logic of projects, see Boltanski and Chiapello, 2011.
- 216 For critique of Logframe, see Krause, Monika. *The good project: Humanitarian relief NGOs and the fragmentation of reason*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014; Giovalucchi, Francois and Olivier de Sardan, Jean-Pierre. Planification, gestion et politique dans l'aide au développement: Le cadre logique, outil et miroir des développeurs. *Revue Tiers Monde* 2 (2009): 383–406.
- 217 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Letter from DC to NS, Chairman of Sphere Project Management Committee, 12 May 1999.
- 218 Sphere Project Archives\Box 24\Regional Consultations Eastern and Southern Africa, March 1998.
- 219 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Letter from NS to the signatories of the Letter of the 10th September, 24 November 1998.
- 220 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Conference Report 3 December 1998.
- 221 Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2001.
- 222 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Fax from PP (ICRC chief medical officer) to IM, 17 July 1998.
- 223 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from LG to SP, No Date [spring 1998].
- 224 Some elements of the humanitarian charter were inserted in the chapter. An example on the evolution of the “food” chapter: Young, Helen. Linking rights and standards: The process of developing ‘rights-based’ minimum standards on food security, nutrition, and food aid. *Disasters* 28, no. 2 (2004): 142–159, here p. 142.
- 225 In 2011, furthermore, a new distinction between “key actions” and “indicators” (which are meant to measure outcomes of actions) was inserted.
- 226 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meetings, Washington, DC, 18–19 May 1999.
- 227 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\A History of the Sphere Project and the French NGOs.
- 228 For example: Peter and Purdin, 2004.
- 229 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Letter from NS to the signatories of the Letter of the 10th September, 24 November 1998.
- 230 Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2001.
- 231 Walker and Purdin, 2004: 105.
- 232 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Minimum Standards for Water Supply and Sanitation in Emergencies, Revised Draft 16 December 1997. By JA.
- 233 Porter, Theodore M. *Trust in numbers: The pursuit of objectivity in science and public life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- 234 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Minutes of the Sphere Management Committee Meeting, London, 10 November 1998.

- 235 Sphere Project: 1. The *Humanitarian Charter* was based on the principles of International Humanitarian Law, mainly the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their *Additional Protocols of 1977*, International Human Rights Law (The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948*), Refugee Law (The *Convention on the Status of Refugees, 1951*) and the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*.
- 236 Although, in the interviews given by the Sphere actors, the Sphere Project was very much about the “humanitarian charter” – a tool they qualified as a “right-based approach” – the Sphere Project is known by humanitarian workers mostly for the “technical” part of the handbook, i.e. the standards and indicators (most humanitarian workers interviewed refer to Sphere as a set of standards) (Satterthwaite, 2011: 893).
- 237 Sphere Project. *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response*. 1st ed., 2000: 30.
- 238 Sphere Project Archives\Box13\Email from PW to SP, 15 March 1998.
- 239 Quoted in Van Dyke and Waldman, 2004: 32.
- 240 Sphere Project Archives\Box13\Email from JB to SP, 22 December 1997.
- 241 A worry which was shared by others: “Every word has been scrutinized and debated, and I’m afraid if we edit post-approval it will raise heckles (or suspicions, or risks that we’ll alter meaning).” Sphere Project Archives\Box13\Email from SP to PH H, 15 March 1998.
- 242 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Email from PW to IM, 2 May 1998.
- 243 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Fax from SD to PW, 22 July 1998.
- 244 Stockton’s answer to the French letter was a paradigmatic example of how ambiguous vocabulary should maintain consent: On the one hand, the standards were “universal.” On the other hand, their application had to be “tailored to each unique situation.” Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Letter from NS to the signatories of the Letter of the 10th September, 24 November 1998.
- 245 Walker, Peter. Le projet Sphere: Une nouvelle ère dans les secours d’urgence. *Revue des questions humanitaires* 2, no. 1 (1998).
- 246 Sphere Project Archives\Box 2\Lola Gostelow: The Sphere Project. The implications of Making Humanitarian Principles and Codes Work, 1997.
- 247 Darcy, J. Locating responsibility: The sphere humanitarian charter and its rationale. *Disasters* 28, no. 2 (2004):112–123.
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- 248 Peter Walker had suggested that there were 7 steps for improving standards: 1. Define the standards; 2. Provide the tools to facilitate the use of better standards; 3. Check for adherence to the standards; 4. Establish a registry of NGOs which are complying; 5. Establish the complaints procedure; 6. Establish an investigative procedure; 7. Decide what to do with outcome of investigations undertaken. See Record of 3rd Bi-Annual ALNAP meeting, 7–8 May 1998, ALNAP Secretariat, Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI, London. www.alnap.org, (Accessed 2017–10–01).
- 249 On the early expectations of the Sphere team on their objectives, see Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Email from PW to NS and SP, 6 September 1997.
- 250 MSF International Archives\Box 195\Mail from FD (MSF-Paris) to MSF International, 19 February 2001.
- 251 MSF International Archives\Box 195\Position de Médecins Sans Frontières sur Sphere, le médiateur humanitaire, les codes de conduites et les strategic framework [no date/ 2000].
- 252 Tong, 2004: 181.

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- 253 This is obvious for instance in the oft-quoted critique by Griekspoor and Collins: Griekspoor and Collins, 2001: 741–742.
- 254 Mann, 2015.
- 255 This was not always the case. During the 1950s, one of the claims of labor organizations in French West Africa was equal pay for equal work. See Cooper, 1996.
- 256 Sphere Project Archives\Box 10\Minutes of the Plenary Meeting of DRC, Washington, 3 December 1998.
- 257 And reaches 25% of humanitarian funding. Buchanan-Smith, 2003: 6.
- 258 Sphere Project Archives\Box 13\Email from IL (UNICEF) to SP, 17 December 1997.

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