

FIRST THINGS FIRST

UNDERSTANDING PRIORITIES IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Executive summary

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The research was conducted in the period March-December 2020 as part of a capstone applied research project under the Graduate Institute's Master in International Affairs and Master in Development Studies curricula. Capstone Projects are a unique learning experience where small groups of graduate students work with partners from International Geneva to conduct research projects that respond to today's global challenges. The following study was conducted by the authors on the basis of HERE's initial project proposal with the guidance of the partner organization and academic supervisions from the Institute.

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The following document provides a short summary of the research and findings, if you would like to read the full report please feel free to contact Anna Ploeg at anna.ploeg@graduateinstitute.ch.

Photo cover: Kutupalong refugee camp, Cox's Bazar,

First things first. Understanding priorities in humanitarian action

In the humanitarian arena, actors interpret and prioritize different humanitarian actions. The various ways in which they interpret their mission generates multiple understandings of life-saving criterion. As the criteria and definitions of life-saving keeps evolving, these multiple understandings may create confusion within the humanitarian community as humanitarian actors have differing priorities in times of crisis and differing means to address these priorities.

The overall objective of this research project was to better understand **how the priorities of humanitarian action have changed over time**. More precisely, it studies **how the understanding of ‘life-saving’ has evolved since the first edition of the Sphere Handbook, which was published in 2000**. Specifically, this report examines; 1) the evolution of humanitarian priorities throughout history, and 2) analyzes the evolution of the notion of life-saving in the Sphere Handbooks by looking at the Minimum Standards of the first (2000) and last (2018) editions as a reference.

The cornerstone of this research is Sphere and more specifically, the Minimum Standards that have been developed through the Sphere Handbooks. We chose to focus on the Sphere Handbooks, because they represent a major contribution in terms of humanitarian priorities and standards and have become a global reference in the humanitarian sector. The Sphere Standards have been created in order to “improve the quality of assistance provided to people affected by disasters, and to enhance the accountability of the humanitarian system in disaster response” (Sphere Handbook, 2000). Sphere understands life-saving assistance as including four main sectors: WASH (water supply, sanitation and hygiene), shelter, food assistance and health.

The full report includes five main sections; section 1 contextualizes the Handbooks, section 2 discusses this report’s methodological approach and conceptual framework, section 3 recounts the history of humanitarian action, section 4 gives an analysis of the evolution of life-saving and humanitarian priorities between the first and last Handbook and finally section 5 brings it all together in a conclusion. The outcomes of this research are as follows;

The broad literature review in section 3 looked at the evolution of priorities in humanitarian action since the Battle of Solferino (1859) to the present day. This section helped us better understand the concept of life-saving and its overall theoretical evolution within the humanitarian discourse over time. As illustrated throughout our literature review, humanitarian aid and life-saving support after crises has evolved drastically. It shifted in priority from relying on the idea of charity and being targeted towards victims of war, to being based around the institutionalization of international cooperation, to focusing on addressing the structural causes of suffering. Finally, it shifted to an era of “new wars” characterized by an increase in non international armed conflict in the global South, rendering the work of humanitarian organizations very complex. As a result, humanitarianism has become increasingly politicized and professionalized.

The genocide in Rwanda triggered a need for the standardization of aid because of concerns over the quality and impact of humanitarian assistance and this is where the Sphere Standards came in. There was a need to professionalize and standardize the delivery of humanitarian assistance in order to increase its effectiveness and to make it more accountable toward affected populations. The objective of the Sphere Project therefore was not only to help organizations and practitioners save more lives, but also to do it better.

To best answer our research questions, we built on Barnett's proposition and the existing literature dealing with 'international paternalism' and 'humanitarian governance'¹. Using this lens, this report analyzes 1) how the Sphere's Handbook's principles of care² and concrete life-saving activities evolved over time (2000-2018), and 2) how the discourses and practices around these care principles might reproduce and/or reduce power asymmetries between humanitarian actors and affected populations.

The outputs of the care category showed that although the main four life-saving chapters have not changed, the content and approaches to life-saving and who it is geared towards has evolved. The foreword in the latest edition of the Handbook put it succinctly, "the immediate survival needs of people in conflict and disasters remain largely the same wherever crisis strikes" (2018, v). However, we noted an evolution in priorities in the humanitarian sector between the first and most recent edition. The outputs demonstrate an expansion in life-saving priorities. Although the life-saving chapters themselves have remained largely the same, the standards within them have evolved to reflect a growing sense of care towards people affected by crisis and the environment.

More specifically, we saw that between the first and last edition of the Sphere Handbooks, there has been an increase in accountability for humanitarian organizations towards people affected by crises, the language of the Handbook includes more acknowledgements about the environment, child safeguarding and mental health. There is also more mentioning of the limitations of aid, keeping in mind that varying contexts mean that there is no one size fits all approach to aid delivery. The standards have become more targeted and mindful of certain vulnerabilities. Although largely the standards protect the same people, there is a shift in awareness as to how some peoples may be more affected than others; this is important because when providing life-saving assistance, humanitarian actors can take these varying vulnerabilities into account. Moreover, the ways in which to provide life-saving support has put a greater emphasis on cash assistance. Lastly, the types of crises that exist and trigger the need for aid have broadened and have put more focus on crises in urban settings.

The expansion of changes to who life-saving support is attributed to, and how and when support is given, shows that the most recent Handbook has become more caring and provides more efficient standards for life-saving assistance.

The outputs of the control category show that the content of the Sphere Handbook has evolved toward balancing standardization with contextualization and the active involvement of local

¹ Barnett defines humanitarian governance as; "a machine of intervention (...) operating on behalf of 'humanity', in the name of the 'people', and as committed to a politics of empowerment". However, as he points out, humanitarian governance is often driven by "an emancipatory ethic" involving a paternalistic "mixture of care and control" (2012, 486).

² Care being the growing concern over increasing life-saving priorities to better assist affected populations.

actors in the design and implementation of humanitarian responses. While analyzing if the discourses around life-saving still include some forms of paternalism, we found that more and more, Sphere recognizes that it is not enough to simply save lives. The evolution of the Handbooks has also shown that humanitarian actors need to respect local people's dignity, voices and expertise while providing assistance.

More specifically, we saw that between the first and last edition of the Sphere Handbook, local authorities took on a primary role in the coordination and implementation of humanitarian assistance. Sphere also highlights that local and national expertise and guidelines should be considered first, and if they are not available, then to look at international ones. Moreover, we noticed that it is an increasing priority for Sphere to recall that the indicators should be contextualized and do not aim to quantify needs of affected populations. The decreasing number of indicators and the emphasis on their adaptability shows efforts to remind practitioners that their judgment as well as beneficiaries' concerns are important to consider in order to build programmes that respond to the unique needs of people affected by crisis. Moreover, we noted that despite the fact that contributors of the Handbooks remain mostly based in the global North, Sphere has made more of an effort to involve people from all over the world into the revision of the Standards.

Finally, as this evolution indicates an overall decrease of control and paternalism, our analysis also points out that there is still a long way to go to make sure that the revision and implementation of the Standards do not reproduce power asymmetries between affected populations and humanitarian actors. We can therefore conclude that Sphere is on the right track to promote more horizontal relationships within the humanitarian community.

Altogether, our findings have shown that the broadening of priorities in humanitarian assistance has allowed for improvement in the quality of assistance to affected populations. Our analysis has shed light on how this expansion took place and why, so that humanitarian actors can address any confusion over differing interpretations of life-saving priorities.

As priorities of humanitarian action may keep expanding to address new contexts, needs, and dynamics, they must be sure to put affected populations at the center of the decision making process of determining what life-saving categories are prioritized in order to best address their needs, in an effective and accountable manner.

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