



MSF position vis a vis the SPHERE Project

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Brussels, 25th March 2003

Dear all,

Considering the questions received concerning MSF current position regarding the Sphere Project and specially our participation in the revision of the handbook, we feel it important to clarify our past and present role in this Project.

Acknowledging that humanitarian aid was sometimes inadequate, MSF agreed to participate in the development of the Sphere handbook (Phase I). Why? Firstly, because we felt it was our responsibility to transmit our technical experience; secondly, with a view to ensuring that these standards would be in line with our practices. The outcome was a catalogue of standards, which very often look like guidelines or references, and are very minimal. As the SPHERE standards were similar in many respect to the MSF guidelines, we endorsed Sphere standards. But knowing they would not change our practices, we found no reason to participate in training sessions organised in the field under Phase II, as MSF had already training sessions before the Sphere Project began. In particular we were concerned that agencies should take their own responsibility for enhancing quality action and not become dependent on SPHERE.

Since the very beginning, MSF chose to participate in the process in a critical way, which means we supported it but permanently expressed our concerns on possible perverse effects of the exercise. The standards were for us just a guideline or a tool to improve the quality of humanitarian assistance: knowing that every situation in which humanitarian action is deployed is unique, technical standards are a valuable accomplishment (as a simple codification of technical competencies), but they cannot constitute a bible of pre-established norms to be respected at any price and in all circumstances.

Our main criticism of the Sphere Project is that it risks reducing, rather than expanding, the scope for effective humanitarian action. Why? Because it can reinforce the notion that humanitarian action is all about assistance and technical issues, while hiding the fact that protection, respect for principles (shortly addressed in the humanitarian chapter) and political issues are paramount. In addition there is concern that it could engender non-risk taking behaviour and an uncritical relationship to humanitarian funding with institutional donors. Humanitarian action is not only relief: it is also a reflection on some people in a certain moment and context.

For MSF, to assist without the intention to protect reduces humanitarian action to a simple mechanical and material exercise, devoid of its humanitarian ethos which necessarily must be to acknowledge and protect the dignity of the other. Focusing on technical aspects of relief operations is often at the expense of addressing the more difficult ethical issues of humanitarian action.

Furthermore, when over-emphasizing the importance of delivering assistance, NGOs may be viewed as having the objective of being merely good technical service providers and may be used as such by donor governments. This could even lead to reducing humanitarian action to a business to be well performed technically, and to sidelining principles of humanitarian action. At the same time, if humanitarian action is co-opted this way, it can allow politicians to avoid their duty and responsibility to provide and protect humanitarian space.

Humanitarian action is too complex to be reduced to a technical performance. Using the technical standards as the sole definers of humanitarian action threatens to simply transform it into a standardised/instrumentalised system which it is not, and must not become. Our aim is not to be solely responsible for humanitarian action, but also to catalyze formally legitimate states and the community of states to engage their duty to both provide and protect people in crisis and the possibility for full and effective humanitarian action.

Finally, the Sphere Project provides mechanisms through which control can be exerted over aid organisations by the very powers from with NGOs should strive to remain independent. Many donor governments have made adherence to these standards a prerequisite for funding. Furthermore technical

failure can be used to cancel support for humanitarian action on the wrong grounds (eg technical failure being a direct result of the context).

MSF is in favour of constantly seeking to develop and disseminate the best technical standards in humanitarian action, but these cannot be used as the driving force for a successful humanitarian project. Of course, NGOs (including MSF) must continue to fight to improve the material component of humanitarian action, but this should be done as a current practice rather than through the Sphere Project; otherwise, we will overly institutionalise the whole process and will no longer have a reason to stop it some day.

At its meeting in October 11th, 2002, the Executive Committee treated the issue of our position on the update of the guidelines: *"the Executive Committee decided that MSF will not be involved because MSF believes that the answer to the problem Sphere tries to tackle is political and not technical"*.

This is why MSF is not participating in Phase III (2000-03), where the evaluation of the impact of Sphere is at stake. The Project is over for us, it has achieved its goals. It has undoubtedly improved awareness among aid organisations of the guiding practices of humanitarian action and the need to strive for certain minimum standards of care.

Sincerely yours,

Rafael Vila SanJuan
Secretary-General

The Sphere Project started as an initiative aimed at improving the quality of relief action and the accountability of NGOs, through the establishment of technical standards in five core sectors (water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter and site planning and health services).

During Phase I (1997-1998), a preliminary edition of a Sphere handbook was developed, including the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards for the care sectors of water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter and site management, and health services. Many humanitarian actors recognized Phase I of the Sphere Project.

In Phase II (1998-2000), activities were focused on making that commitment a reality through dissemination, debate and implementation. This phase included two formal reviews of the preliminary handbook and new text regarding gender and protection issues was incorporated into the final first edition.

We are currently in Phase III (2000-2003) of the project, in which many of the activities initiated during Phase II continue and a new area of work - the evaluation of the impact of Sphere – has begun. Its objective is to follow up the work initiated in Phase II with activities that specifically promote a more profound understanding of the Project.