Shelter responses need to suit local conditions.
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The weight of a standard

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The Oxford English Dictionary gives a number of definitions for the word 'standard'. These include 'an authoritative or recognized exemplar of correctness, perfection, or some definite degree of any quality', 'a definite degree of any quality, viewed as a prescribed object of endeavour', and 'the authorized exemplar of a unit of measure or weight'.

These definitions invoke concepts relevant to humanitarian practice in shelter and settlements. Standards exist in the realm of policies, regulations, codes of conduct, implementation strategies, guidelines and manuals. Among such interlinked frameworks and practices, what is the weight – that is, the importance – of a standard?

Standards are commonplace. As a network of 161 national standards bodies, the International Organization for Standardization develops standards,[1] as do the African Organisation for Standardisation[2] and the three European Standards Organizations,[3] providing a reliable basis for people to share the same expectations about a product or service. These organizations are the reference point for standardization. Standards refer to some level of uniformity, universality, authority and quality, an agreed way of doing something. They define a level of performance against which everything else aspiring to perform the same function is measured. It is by defining and applying standards that we make comparisons or choices and create frameworks against which we can be held accountable to improve our performance. In short, standards help bring order to the created world, and they uphold everything else that is built upon them. So, with concepts like quality, excellence and universality in mind, what do standards mean in the humanitarian context?

The weight of humanitarian standards

Anyone familiar with the humanitarian sector will be aware of the fluidity and complexity of our operating contexts. Conflict, war, famine, rapid-onset disasters and any combination of these crises tear down existing systems and throw people into an abyss of the unknown, into unpredictable situations that may be unsafe and

insecure. The pre-crisis world is barely functioning or recognizable. So, what weight does a standard carry during a crisis or state of emergency? There are several global humanitarian standards, such as the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS),[4] the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergency (INEE) Minimum Standards,[5] and the Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS).[6] Perhaps the best known, however, are the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, commonly known as the Sphere Standards, or just Sphere.[7] In exploring where 'the weight of a standard' lies, we might consider the following information from Sphere:

- The standards are based upon international humanitarian and human rights law and are informed by humanitarian principles. They recognize that all people affected by disaster and conflict have a right to life with dignity, and therefore a right to assistance and protection. They recognize everyone's right to life with dignity with an adequate standard of living, including the right to adequate housing.[8]

- The *Sphere Handbook*'s technical chapters, such as the shelter and settlement chapter, translate the rights and principles of the Humanitarian Charter, Protection Principles and the Core Humanitarian Standard into practical action to save lives, and promote dignity and recovery.

- The Sphere standards are based on evidence, practitioner experience and field testing, and compiled expert opinion. They are universal and must be interpreted in context to make them operational.

- The Sphere standards are founded on principles of consensus, openness, transparency and non-discrimination. For instance, the 2018 revision of the standards (in which the authors of this chapter were closely involved), drew upon consultation with

thousands of practitioners from hundreds of countries, of whom about one-third were local or national practitioners working in their own countries.

- The Sphere standards remind us of our obligations and duties to ensure that people enjoy the fundamental right to a life with dignity.

Humanitarian standards for shelter and settlements

In nearly all countries of the world, the construction industry is closely governed by rules, regulations and standards. Planning, design and building are all professional disciplines subject to many complex laws, regulations, codes and standards that require close adherence. Non-compliance can result in serious legal, financial and societal consequences for those at fault. There may be gaps in enforcement, and room for interpretation, but the underlying need for such regulation is seldom contested. Professionals such as planners, architects, engineers, land surveyors and builders are trained and licensed, and shoulder significant liabilities and responsibilities for adhering to and upholding standards and codes of professional conduct.

While this is the norm in the formal sector, when we step into the humanitarian context, some humanitarian actors question the need for and relevance of such regulatory frameworks. Some responders, knowingly or unknowingly, choose and justify interventions that ignore, side-step or neglect national standards (especially where local governance is weak), or even think that these standards do not apply to them. A multitude of reasons could be behind such thinking: for instance, some justify their non-compliance or negligence by saying that their shelter and settlements programmes do not involve engineered structures.

Some international emergency responders fail to familiarize themselves with the rules,

regulations and standards to which they should adhere. Some choose to ignore the rules, believing they will not be held to account. Others may think that standards governing the built environment are too difficult, costly or time-consuming to observe – an attitude that would be unthinkable in their own country! In some operating environments standards may be out of date, not accurate enough, or not enforced. This can create room for interpretation, and often results in an environment that seems arbitrary and unaccountable, especially if the host government or donors do not insist on compliance. Finally, standards for the built environment can be complex and detailed. To understand and apply them requires not only professional expertise but also local contextual expertise, because standards emerge from local geography, practices, techniques and materials. Even a seasoned built-environment professional needs to research, understand and acclimatize to a new place. Despite this, many international generalists in humanitarian work are given the task of designing and implementing shelter and settlements programmes.

It is not straightforward to devise practical, universal standards for sheltering and housing that can be applied across international boundaries. For example, the 2018 *Sphere Handbook* outlines the minimum standard for people to have access to living spaces that are safe and adequate, enabling essential household and livelihoods activities to be undertaken with dignity.[9] The standard is accompanied by three actions:

1. Ensure that each affected household has adequate living space to perform basic domestic activities.

2. Ensure that the space immediately surrounding the living space supports fundamental activities.

3. Promote the use of shelter solutions, construction techniques and materials that are culturally and socially acceptable, and environmentally sustainable.

Accompanying this standard is the well-known measurement of a minimum 3.5 square metres of living space per person, excluding cooking space, bathing area and sanitation facility. This measurement has become a mantra for the shelter sector and has often been taken as a 'rule' because it offers an easily measured figure on which to base any accountability. Meeting this *minimum* requirement is intended to prevent outbreaks of disease or illness due to overcrowding. But humanitarian response should be concerned less with minimum measurements and more with adapting the standard itself (safe and adequate living space) to a specific situation. We must always remember that this measurement is a reference point that needs to be appropriately contextualized.

For example, in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, many of the damaged houses in Port-au-Prince were deemed unfit for occupancy. In urban areas – where space had always been limited – plots were now full of rubble, forcing occupants to seek living space elsewhere. Displaced populations settled on open land, including parks, roadsides and private land. Many displaced people who remained in the city ended up in crowded camps. Pre-earthquake houses in Port-au-Prince were mostly two- or three-storey structures in informal settlements and formal neighbourhoods. In informal settlements, plots were irregularly shaped and as small as 4 square metres.

One aid agency in Port-au-Prince designed a single-storey transitional shelter based on a design used in the 2004 tsunami response. Its footprint measured 12 feet by 16 feet, giving a total living space of 192 square feet (17.8 square metres), which conforms to the Sphere space measure of 3.5 square metres per person. The agency started to construct these shelters on site, but very quickly ran into problems of limited land. So it had to redesign the shelter to suit the local context, causing delay that ultimately affected the timeliness of the assistance. In such a scenario, a step-by-step investigation of the local conditions

and the actions needed should have taken priority over only observing the global minimum 3.5 square metres of living space. Considering the operational context (which would have included understanding pre-earthquake house sizes and typologies, the cultural norms of Haitian families, international considerations of what constitutes safe and dignified living space, and operational limitations) would have been a better and more effective approach. Learning from this experience, it would have been good practice to agree on a minimum urban space measurement with the Haitian government and the Haiti Shelter Cluster.

A more recent example comes from Ethiopia. Due to conflict between two ethnic groups, internally displaced persons took refuge with host communities and in collective centres. To help decongest one collective centre, where more than 3000 people were sleeping in a sports hall, an aid agency constructed temporary shelters that provided 24 square metres of living space for an average family of six or seven people, which meets Sphere's guidance of a minimum of 3.5 square metres of living space per person. However, after a few pilot units were constructed, the local authorities raised concerns. For instance, with limited land available for family shelters in the compound grounds, space was needed for other activities. Secondly, there was a question of equity and potential tension in the community, due to the great difference between the covered space available per person in these temporary shelters and the space for those who remained in the sports hall. An additional concern was the limited life span of the temporary shelters, as displaced people were expected to move on or return to their original village soon. The need to contextualize the standards, consider protection implications, and consult with the community was clear. As a result, it was agreed to provide a smaller shelter, with 2.5 square metres of living space per person.

These two examples reinforce how 3.5 square metres can be a useful reference measurement and starting point. But it is essential to focus on the *standard* of safe and adequate living space, interpreting what this means in context with partners and the community.

Guidance for the future

Standards are distilled wisdom. Helpful humanitarian standards are developed through consensus, informed by the most current technical knowledge and practice, drawing upon global experience, and refined to be locally applicable. Standards are not something that can be kept on the shelf; nor are they an abstract concept. The weight of a standard lies in its power to translate fundamental rights and principles into actions that save lives, protect dignity and promote recovery. They can transcend borders, languages and cultures, bring us closer together, and help us agree. Standards can be a powerful tool for influencing policy, fostering innovation, increasing productivity, and leading programs and organizations to success. Among the chaos of a crisis, a standard may be the only stable reference point that guides us with a glimmer of commonality.

Standards in the humanitarian shelter sector help us remain transparent and accountable to those we serve and those who invest in our work, offering a clearer understanding of what we agree must be done, and what people can expect of a humanitarian response. They help us to coordinate with others, as we have one common reference point through shared standards. Standards also help the shelter and settlement sector work in a more effective, timely and predictable way, because they are agreed in advance of a crisis and clearly state what we will do.

Humanitarian standards have grown out of a tradition of improving humanitarian assistance over the last few decades. Importantly, they have helped the humanitarian sector answer questions of quality and professionalization. Standards save lives, because all these factors combine to make us better at what we do – serving those in need

when the need is greatest. The Humanitarian Charter expresses our shared conviction as humanitarian agencies that all people affected by disaster or conflict have a right to receive protection and assistance to ensure the basic conditions for life with dignity. We believe that the principles set out in the Humanitarian Charter are universal, applying to all those affected by disaster or conflict wherever they may be, and to all those who seek to assist them or provide for their security. These principles are reflected in international law, but ultimately derive their force from the fundamental moral principle of humanity: that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Based on this principle, we affirm the primacy of the humanitarian imperative: that action should be taken to prevent or alleviate human suffering arising out of disaster or conflict, and that nothing should override this principle.

All people affected by crisis – indeed all people – have a right to life with dignity. It is the duty of humanitarians to ensure that their actions among people in crisis contribute to the fulfilment of these rights. Standards, codes and other regulatory tools help humanitarian agencies meet this obligation. This is the main purpose of standards such as Sphere, and thus they are indispensable to the work of the shelter and settlements sector. The 2018 revision of the shelter and settlements chapter of Sphere emphasizes protecting people's right to adequate housing, which means security of tenure; availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure; affordability; habitability; accessibility; location; and cultural adequacy. The standards focus on the process of sheltering and offer guiding principles, rather than numerical stipulations that may be context-specific. They are closely linked to the revised guidance supporting the nine commitments of the Core Humanitarian Standard.[10]

Conclusion

From our experience of leading the 2018 revision of the Sphere shelter and settlements chapter, through all the rounds of consultation across the globe, we learned that practices in the shelter and settlements sector have changed significantly since the last revision in 2011. Changes include more contextualized planning of responses; emphasis on incremental recovery; adapting assistance to better suit urban contexts; the use of different modes of implementation; the importance of security of tenure; and promoting environmental sustainability. All input from practitioners and responders who deal every day with these rapidly changing realities among crisis-affected communities was carefully considered. As a result, the chapter is organized from large-scale towards smaller scale, cascading from overall response planning to settlement level to household level, all against a backdrop of essential considerations such as security of tenure and environmental sustainability. Each standard will help communities live in conditions that are safe, secure, healthy, inclusive, resilient and sustainable. We hope this set of revised standards will be the stable reference point in moments of crisis and in preparedness planning, guiding our humanitarian actions in years to come.

1   International Organization for Standardization (2018) *ISO: A Global Network of National Standards Bodies*. www.iso.org/members.html.

2   African Organisation for Standardisation (2017) *About*. www.arso-oran.org/about.

3   CEN (2018) *European Committee for Standardization*. www.cen.eu.

4   Core Humanitarian Standard (2018) *The Standard*. https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard.

5   *INEE: An International Network for Education in Emergencies*. www.ineesite.org/en.

6   The LEGS Project (2018) *Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards*. www.livestock-emergency.net.

7   See Sphere (2018) *About*. www.spherestandards.org/about.

8   UN-Habitat (2009) *The Right to Adequate Housing*. Fact Sheet No 21/ Rev 1. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva. www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FS21_rev_1_Housing_en.pdf.

9   The Sphere Project (forthcoming, 2018) *The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response* (4th edn).

10 Core Humanitarian Standard (nd) *The Nine Commitments*. https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/files/files/CHS%20Nine%20Commitments%20posters%20English.pdf.

Box 18.1

Measuring the adequacy of shelter
Definitions, criteria and methodologies

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Adequacy of shelter is included in many indicators or measures of emergency response. It is a core principle of shelter provision, and is linked to personal dignity, and to dwelling safety and appropriateness.

However, one of the main difficulties encountered when attempting to measure shelter adequacy is obtaining accurate data across various contexts. This is due partly to the multi-sectoral nature of the criteria, and the wide range of environments in which humanitarian agencies work, as well as to variations between shelter designs, materials and costs. In addition, different adequacy indicators may sometimes conflict with each other. Most shelter actors therefore agree that a one-size-fits-all definition of adequacy is almost impossible.

Comparing definitions of shelter adequacy

Nevertheless, when comparing shelter adequacy definitions, some commonalities can easily be identified. Perhaps the best-known definition is the one used by UN-Habitat, the United Nations agency for human settlements and sustainable urban development. Its seven criteria are thought to be applicable to any context:[1]

1. security of tenure (guarantees legal protection against forced evictions, for instance)

2. availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure (such as safe drinking water)

3. affordability (cost should not threaten or compromise other human rights)

4. habitability (guarantees physical safety and provides adequate space)

5. accessibility (specific needs of disadvantaged and marginalized groups are taken into account)

6. location (not cut off from employment opportunities or located in dangerous areas)

7. cultural adequacy (respects and takes into account cultural identity).

There are other definitions that we can compare with these seven criteria. The Sphere Project, which has developed a set of minimum standards in core areas of humanitarian assistance, includes a standard for shelter in its 2011 Handbook. This aligns with the criteria of accessibility, cultural adequacy and habitability, while introducing a measurement for 'adequate space' (3.5 square metres or 4.5 square metres per person, depending on the climate, which is discussed in Chapter 18).[2]

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees suggests several criteria for its definition of adequacy, which correspond to accessibility and habitability, although to the latter is added the provision of 'dignified living space with a degree of privacy and comfort'.[3]

The Global Shelter Cluster (GSC) coordinates humanitarian shelter for internally displaced people. Its definitions of adequacy vary by operation; the example used here is from the Philippines.[4] Although the guidance omits affordability, and security of tenure, two elements are added to the definition of habitability, namely 'durability' (adequate for the period of intended use) and 'privacy' (allowing the addition of at least one internal division).

Although other agencies have expanded on it, the UN-Habitat definition seems to be the most comprehensive. It has also been incorporated into the 2018 edition of the *Sphere Handbook*.

Common measures of adequacy

Two common indicators are used for measuring shelter adequacy. The first is the average covered living area per person, using the *Sphere Handbook* standard. Unfortunately, this is one of the most misleading measurements of adequacy, as it reflects neither the technical quality of shelter nor the associated living conditions.

The second is beneficiary satisfaction, which may indicate how the shelter meets the household's needs, but it can be subjective and result in data that cannot be compared between households. In addition, beneficiary satisfaction does not necessarily mean that a shelter provides adequate safety and reduced risk, when measured against technical specifications and design.

These two indicators can therefore only serve – at best – as proxies for shelter adequacy. Methods of calculating vulnerability by scoring across several adequacy categories have been piloted by individual agencies (for example in Nepal and the Democratic Republic of the Congo), but have not yet been applied systematically or at scale.

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Developing a consistent methodology

Some common adequacy criteria can be identified and applied regardless of contextual variations, such as the availability of services, habitability, accessibility and cultural adequacy. Criteria for security of tenure, affordability and location should be included when relevant, for instance when affected populations are not predominantly staying in agency-managed shelters.

For each of these criteria, an agreed set of qualitative attributes with a list of measurable parameters and possible proxy indicators should be defined, including the frequency at which they should be assessed. These can be further detailed, contextualized and updated as needed, in light of the shelter solution and response phase.

Although it makes sense for a minimum level of adequacy to be defined by global standards at the onset of an acute emergency, the adequacy attributes should be contextualized as soon as possible in consultation with the affected population, to ensure that they are informed by the local climate and cultural needs. This should prevent conflicting criteria, such as occurred in the Philippines, where access to services and livelihoods by the coast clashed with safety, due to typhoon impact.[5]

To this end, in early 2018 the Global Shelter Cluster launched a new working group, which will develop a vulnerability classification methodology for the shelter sector, based on good practice among country-level clusters (such as shelter score-cards) and on international research.[6] The methodology will take into account existing norms from initiatives in both the public sector (such as the right to adequate housing) and the private sector (such as the insurance industry), and will span the divide between humanitarian and development scenarios. This should ensure broad acceptance and applicability in preparedness, post-crisis humanitarian situations, and other contexts.

1   UN-HABITAT (2010) *The Right to Adequate Housing*. Fact Sheet No 21/Rev 1. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva. https://unhabitat.org/the-right-to-adequate-housing-fact-sheet-no-21rev-1.

2   Sphere Project (2011) 'Shelter and Settlement Standard 3: Covered living space'. *Sphere Handbook*. www.spherehandbook.org/en/shelter-and-settlement-standard-3-covered-living-space.

3   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. *Impact Guidance Sheets*. Available on the UNHCR intranet.

4   Humanitarian Shelter Working Group (2014) *Recovery Shelter Guidelines* [Typhoon Haiyan 2013]. Global Shelter Cluster. www.sheltercluster.org/typhoon-haiyan-2013/documents/recovery-shelter-guidelines.

5   REACH (2016) *Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) Shelter Response Outcome Assessment: Final Report*. Global Shelter Cluster. www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/phl_report_shelter_recovery_outcome_assessment_may_2016.pdf.

6   Global Shelter Cluster (2018) *Shelter Vulnerability Classification Working Group*. www.sheltercluster.org/working-group/shelter-vulnerability-classification.