

Core Humanitarian STANDARD

Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability

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Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability

i. Introduction

Every day and all over the world, countless people from all walks of life are moved to act in response to the humanitarian imperative— the call to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it happens.

The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (hereinafter referred to as the CHS) presents a set of Commitments to help humanitarian actors improve the quality and effectiveness of assistance. It also facilitates greater accountability to people and communities affected by crisis: when they know what humanitarian actors have committed to, they will be better able to hold organisations to account.

The CHS places affected people and communities at the centre of humanitarian action and promotes respect for their fundamental rights. The CHS is underpinned by the rights of life with dignity, to receive humanitarian assistance, and to protection and security, as described in the Sphere Humanitarian Charter.

As a core standard it describes the essential elements of principled and accountable quality humanitarian action. Humanitarian organisations may use it as a voluntary code with which to align their own internal procedures. The CHS can also be used as a basis for verification of performance, for which a specific framework and indicators are being developed to ensure its relevance to different contexts and types of organisation.

The CHS can be promoted and implemented by individuals, organisations and collective humanitarian mechanisms such as the cluster system, Humanitarian Country Teams, and pooled funds. It can be used by all those undertaking humanitarian action, whether or not they consider themselves humanitarian organisations.

This Standard is the result of a two-year consultation process across the humanitarian sector. It draws together key elements of existing humanitarian standards and commitments. These include:

- The Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief;
- The 2010 HAP Standard in Accountability and Quality Management;
- People In Aid Code of Good Practice in the Management and Support of Aid Personnel;
- The Sphere Handbook Core Standards and the Humanitarian Charter;
- The Quality Compass; and
- The OECD DAC Criteria for Evaluating Development and Humanitarian Assistance.

Guidance and tools exist to support the widespread uptake of the CHS and the application of each of the Nine Commitments.

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ii. Structure of the Standard

The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) is a set of Nine Commitments on quality and accountable humanitarian action. The standard is structured as follows:

- The Nine Commitments;
- Key actions and organisational responsibilities, from project and programme level to an organisation's headquarters.

The key actions and organisational responsibilities describe:

- What staff engaged in humanitarian action should do to consistently deliver high quality programmes and to be accountable to those they seek to assist; and
- What organisations engaged in humanitarian action need to have in place to ensure their staffs provide high quality, accountable humanitarian assistance.

A glossary of terms used in the CHS with a specific meaning appears at the end of this document.

Figure 1: A snapshot of the CHS



iii. Principled Humanitarian Action

People are at the heart of humanitarian action. The primary motivation of any humanitarian response to crisis is to alleviate human suffering and to support the right to life with dignity.

The right to receive humanitarian assistance should be enjoyed by all people from all countries. Unimpeded access to communities and people affected by crisis is essential to achieve this.

Humanitarian action is guided by the three widely accepted principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Some consider neutrality as a fourth principle (or condition) necessary for humanitarian action. However, since this is not universally accepted by all humanitarian actors, the principle of neutrality has not been included in the CHS¹.

Humanity: All people have intrinsic dignity and must be treated humanely in all circumstances, protecting life and health and ensuring respect for the human being.

Impartiality: Assistance must be given on the basis of needs alone, regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipient and without adverse distinction of any kind; priorities are calculated in proportion to need.

Independence: Assistance is provided based on need alone and organisations must not act as instruments of foreign or domestic government policy.

Humanitarian actors collectively developed the Sphere Humanitarian Charter. It describes the ethical and legal foundations for humanitarian action, and summarises the core rights of communities and people affected by crisis receiving humanitarian assistance. These are

- the right to life with dignity
- the right to receive humanitarian assistance
- the right to protection and security.

The principles of humanitarian action are intended to ensure that people's rights are consistently met. In the CHS, the principles are integrated in the Commitments, key actions and organisational responsibilities.

Humanitarian organisations recognise the primary responsibility of governments and relevant authorities. Humanitarian action should not undermine but complement these responsibilities. If governments are unwilling or unable to fulfil their responsibilities, humanitarian organisations will provide assistance that reflects this reality.

¹ In the humanitarian context, neutrality is defined as not taking sides in hostilities or engaging in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. Many humanitarian organisations that actively engage in both advocacy related to justice and humanitarian action do not believe that they are able to fully adhere to this principle. Other actors who are not primarily humanitarian organisations but undertake humanitarian action may not be able to because of their mandate.

iv. The Nine Commitments

- 1. Communities and people affected by crisis receive assistance appropriate and relevant to their needs.**

Humanitarian assistance is appropriate and relevant

- 2. Communities and people affected by crisis have access to the humanitarian assistance they need at the right time.**

Response is effective and timely

- 3. Communities and people affected by crisis are more prepared, resilient and less vulnerable as a result of humanitarian action.**

Humanitarian action strengthens local capacities and avoids negative effects

- 4. Communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements, and participate in decisions that affect them.**

Humanitarian action is based on open feedback and inclusive participation

- 5. Communities and people affected by crisis have access to a safe and responsive complaints mechanism.**

Complaints are welcomed and addressed

- 6. Communities and people affected by crisis receive coordinated, complementary assistance.**

Humanitarian action is coordinated and complementary

- 7. The organisation learns from experience in order to improve outcomes for communities and people affected by crisis.**

Humanitarian actors continuously learn and improve

- 8. Staff are treated fairly and equitably, and are supported to do their job effectively.**

Humanitarian staff are managed and supported responsibly

- 9. Organisations use resources efficiently and effectively for their intended purpose.**

Resources are managed and used responsibly

v. Applying the Standard

Actors involved in humanitarian action are diverse. They need to act in a timely manner, and adapt their actions to the phase and circumstance of the crisis. The key actions required by the CHS need, therefore, to be adapted to the context.

Organisations working in partnerships should understand how their partners, be they donors or peers, implement the Nine Commitments of the CHS. Where gaps are identified, they need to work with them to address these gaps.

Guidance and tools are regularly being developed in the light of experience gained in the application of the CHS. These can help organisations and programmes to implement the CHS in their own context.

It is the responsibility of the organisations involved in humanitarian action to implement the CHS, not that of the communities and people affected by crisis.

The CHS can be used by those involved in humanitarian action:

- to improve the quality of services and facilitate greater accountability to communities and people affected by crisis;
- to develop work-plans for progressive implementation of the CHS and continuous improvement;
- as an overall quality and accountability framework supporting existing organisational and technical standards;
- to self-assess and improve the quality of programmes;
- as a basis for verification or certification of conformity, and to demonstrate this conformity to others; and
- to assess, where relevant, that internal processes and support for staff also meet the actions and organisational responsibilities set out within the CHS.

There may be circumstances in which an organisation is unable to apply the CHS in its entirety. In such a situation, the organisation should acknowledge the issue and consider how to address it in the future. The organisation should learn from such situations and develop ways to overcome these constraints.

Organisations that decide to use this CHS should promote it both within their organisation and externally.

Those assessing the application of the CHS should base their assessment on the extent to which the organisation responds to the intent of the key actions and organisational responsibilities.

vi. Claims

Any individual or organisation involved in humanitarian action is encouraged to use and adopt the CHS and may say they “work towards application of the CHS”. Organisations may only claim that they comply with the CHS if they have undergone objective verification against it.

vii. Commitments, Actions and Responsibilities

1. Humanitarian assistance is appropriate and relevant

Communities and people affected by crisis receive assistance appropriate to their needs.

Key actions

- 1.1 Conduct a systematic, objective and continuous analysis of the context and stakeholders.
- 1.2 Design and implement appropriate programmes based on an impartial assessment of needs² and risks, and an understanding of vulnerabilities and capacities of different groups³.
- 1.3 Adapt the programme to changing needs, capacities and context.

Organisational responsibilities

- 1.4 Policies commit to impartial assistance based on the needs and capacities of communities and people affected by crisis.
- 1.5 Policies set out commitments to take into account the diversity of communities, including disadvantaged or marginalised people, and to collect disaggregated data.
- 1.6 Processes are in place to assure an appropriate on-going analysis of the context.

² “Needs” includes assistance and protection

³ “Different groups” acknowledges the diversity of communities and their different needs and vulnerabilities within a particular context. This may refer, for example, to gender and age-disaggregated groups such as: women, men, girls, boys, youth, transgender, older people; persons with disabilities, specific minority or ethnic groups, etc.

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2. Response is effective and timely

Communities and people affected by crisis have access to the humanitarian assistance they need at the right time.

Key actions

- 2.1 Design programmes taking into account constraints⁴ so that proposed action is realistic.
- 2.2 Deliver assistance in a timely manner, making decisions and acting without unnecessary delay.
- 2.3 Refer any unmet needs to an organisation with the relevant technical expertise and mandate, or advocate for these needs to be addressed.
- 2.4 Use relevant sector technical standards and good practice to plan and assess programmes.
- 2.5 Monitor activities and outputs and address poor performance.

Organisational responsibilities

- 2.6 Ensure programme commitments are in line with organisational capacities.
- 2.7 Policy commitments ensure:
 - a. a systematic, objective and on-going monitoring and evaluation of activities and their effect;
 - b. evidence from monitoring and evaluations is used to adapt and improve programmes; and
 - c. timely decision-making with resources allocated accordingly.

⁴ For instance, humanitarian access, security, logistics and funding.

3. Humanitarian action strengthens local capacities and avoids negative effects

Communities and people affected by crisis are more prepared, resilient and less vulnerable as a result of humanitarian action.

Key actions

- 3.1 Ensure programmes build on and strengthen local capacities for community resilience.
- 3.2 Use the results of any existing community hazard and risk assessments and preparedness plans to guide activities.
- 3.3 Enable the development of local leadership and organisations in their capacity as first responders, with an appropriate representation of marginalised and disadvantaged groups.
- 3.4 Plan a transition or exit strategy in the early stages of the humanitarian programme to ensure longer-term positive effects, reducing the risk of dependency.
- 3.5 Design and implement programmes that benefit the local economy and promote recovery.
- 3.6 Identify and act upon potential or actual unintended negative effects in a timely manner, including in the areas of:
 - a. people's security;
 - b. gender, social and political relationships;
 - c. livelihoods;
 - d. the local economy; and
 - e. the environment.

Organisational responsibilities

- 3.7 Policies, strategies and guidance commit to avoiding negative effects and strengthening local capacities.
- 3.8 Systems are in place to safeguard any personal information collected from communities and people affected by crisis that could put people at risk.

4. Humanitarian action is based on open feedback and inclusive participation

Communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements, and participate in decisions that affect them.

Key actions

- 4.1 Provide information to communities and people affected by crisis about the organisation, the principles it adheres to, the expected behaviours of staff, its programmes and deliverables.
- 4.2 Communicate in languages, formats and media that are easily understood and respectful and culturally appropriate for different parts of the community, especially vulnerable and marginalised groups.
- 4.3 Ensure appropriate representation and engagement of people and communities and other stakeholders throughout the project cycle⁵, paying special attention to vulnerable and marginalised people, taking into account their views in decision-making.
- 4.4 Encourage communities and people affected by crisis to provide feedback on their level of satisfaction with the quality and effectiveness of assistance, paying particular attention to the gender, age balance and diversity of those giving feedback.

Organisational responsibilities

- 4.5 Policies are in place for information sharing, promoted by a culture of open communication.
- 4.6 Policies are in place for engaging communities and people affected by crisis throughout the project cycle.
- 4.7 External communications, including those used for fundraising, are accurate, ethical and respectful, presenting communities and people affected by crisis as dignified human beings.

⁵ The project cycle includes the initial assessment, design, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and phase out of the projects or programmes.

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5. Complaints are welcomed and addressed

Communities and people affected by crisis have access to a safe and responsive complaints mechanism⁶.

Key actions

- 5.1 Put in place a complaints handling process in consultation with communities and people affected by crisis, including mechanisms to effectively protect complainants.
- 5.2 Welcome and accept complaints, and communicate how the complaints mechanism can be accessed.
- 5.3 Document, respond to and act upon complaints in a timely, fair and appropriate manner.

Organisational responsibilities

- 5.4 Establish and maintain an organisational culture in which complaints are seen as an opportunity to learn and improve.
- 5.5 Define expected behaviour of staff, including commitments on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse of people affected by crisis.
- 5.6 Refer complaints securely to a relevant party when they do not fall within the scope of the organisation.

⁶ Addressing complaints can also be seen as part of Commitment Four. However, the importance of complaints mechanisms merit its inclusion as a separate commitment.

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6. Humanitarian action is coordinated and complementary

Communities and people affected by crisis receive coordinated, complementary assistance.

Key actions

- 6.1 Identify the role, responsibilities, capacities and interests of different stakeholders⁷.
- 6.2 Ensure humanitarian action complements that of national and local authorities⁸ and other actors.
- 6.3 Participate in relevant coordination bodies and collaborate with other organisations to minimise demands on communities and maximise coverage and service provision of the wider humanitarian effort.
- 6.4 Share necessary information with partners, coordination groups and other relevant local actors through appropriate communication channels.

Organisational responsibilities

- 6.5 Policies and strategies include a clear commitment to coordination and collaboration with others, including national and local authorities, without compromising humanitarian principles.
- 6.6 Work with partners is governed by clear and consistent agreements that respect each partner's mandates, obligations and independence and recognises their respective constraints and commitments.

⁷ Including local actors, humanitarian agencies, local authorities, private companies and other relevant groups.

⁸ Where authorities are a party to the conflict humanitarian actors should use their judgment vis-à-vis the independence of the action, keeping the interests of communities and people affected by crisis at the centre of their decision.

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7. Humanitarian actors continuously learn and improve

The organisation learns from experience in order to improve outcomes for communities and people affected by crisis.

Key actions

- 7.1 Use prior lessons and experience when designing programmes.
- 7.2 Learn, innovate and implement changes on the basis of evaluation and other review mechanisms.
- 7.3 Share learning and innovation internally, with communities and with other stakeholders.

Organisational responsibilities

- 7.4 Evaluation and learning policies are in place, and means are available to learn from experiences and improve practices.
- 7.5 Mechanisms exist to record and make accessible knowledge and experience throughout the organisation.
- 7.6 The organisation contributes to peer and sector learning and innovation in humanitarian response.

8. Humanitarian staff are managed and supported responsibly

Staff are treated fairly and equitably, and are supported to do their job effectively.

Key actions

- 8.1 Staff work according to the mandate and values of the organisation and to agreed objectives and performance standards.
- 8.2 Staff adhere to the policies that are relevant to them and understand the consequences of not adhering to them.
- 8.3 Staff develop and use the necessary personal, technical and management competencies to fulfil their role and understand how the organisation can support them to do this.

Organisational responsibilities

- 8.4 The organisation has the management and staff capacity and capability to deliver its programmes.⁹
- 8.5 Staff policies and procedures are fair, transparent and non-discriminatory and compliant with local employment law.
- 8.6 Job descriptions, work objectives and feedback processes are in place to ensure that staff have a clear understanding of what is required of them.
- 8.7 A staff code of conduct is in place that establishes, at a minimum, the obligation not to exploit or abuse people.
- 8.8 Policies are in place to support staff to improve their skills and competencies.
- 8.9 Policies are in place for the security and the wellbeing of staff.

⁹ The organisation can provide surge support in times of emergency

9. Resources are managed and used responsibly

Organisations use resources efficiently and effectively for their intended purpose.

Key actions

- 9.1 Design programmes and implement processes that ensure the efficient use of resources¹⁰, balancing quality, cost and timeliness at each phase of the response.
- 9.2 Manage and use resources to achieve their intended purpose, minimising waste.
- 9.3 Monitor and report expenditure against budget.
- 9.4 Use local and natural resources in consideration of their impact on the environment.
- 9.5 Manage risk of corruption and take appropriate action if identified.

Organisational responsibilities

- 9.10 Policies and procedures governing the use and management of resources are in place, including how the organisation:
 - a. accepts and allocates funds and gifts-in-kind ethically and legally;
 - b. uses its resources in an environmentally responsible way;
 - b. prevents and addresses corruption, conflict of interests and misuse of resources; and
 - c. conducts audits and verifies compliance.

¹⁰ “Resources” needs to be understood in its broader sense, encompassing what the organisation needs to deliver its mission, including but not limited to: funds, staff, goods, equipment, time, land area, soil, water, air, natural products and the environment in general.

viii. Technical Glossary

For the purpose of the CHS, the following definitions apply:

Accountability: process of using power responsibly, taking account of, and being held accountable by, different stakeholders, and primarily those who are affected by the exercise of such power.

Document: any form of record of discussions, agreements, decisions and/or actions that is reproducible.

Effectiveness: extent to which an aid activity attains its objectives.

Efficiency: measure to which the outputs, qualitative and quantitative, are achieved as a result of inputs.

Engagement: process by which the organisation communicates, consults and/or provides for the participation of interested and/or affected stakeholders, ensuring that their concerns, desires, expectations, needs, rights and opportunities are considered in the establishment, implementation and review of the programmes.

Neutrality: humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Note: Neutrality is seen as critical to some organisations and secondary to others, depending on the nature or the mandate of the organisation.

Organisation: entity that has the management structure and power to apply the CHS.

Note: The organisation can refer to a single organisation, a collaboration of several organisations within a specific programme, a grouping of several organisations under one umbrella (e.g. members of a network), a subset of an organisation, or any other entity provided it has the management structure and power to apply the CHS and can be held responsible for its application.

Partners: organisations working jointly within a formal arrangement to achieve a specific goal, with clear and agreed roles and responsibilities.

Policy: documented statement of intent and rules for decision-making.

Protection: all activities aimed at ensuring the full and equal respect for the rights of all individuals, regardless of age, gender, ethnic, social, religious or other background, going beyond immediate life-saving activities.

Resilience: ability of a community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner.

Quality: totality of features and characteristics of humanitarian assistance that supports its ability to satisfy in time, stated or implied needs and expectations, and respect the dignity of the people it aims to assist.

Staff: any designated representative of the organisation, including national and international permanent or short-term employees, as well as volunteers and consultants.