

Applying Sphere standards to disaster management in Yemen

Capitalizing on opportunities

“People here are very poor. They really need support. But I have hope; I am optimistic for the future,” says Mohammed Sawlan, disaster management coordinator in the Yemen Red Crescent Society.

Mohammed has been working for Yemen Red Crescent Society since 1992. He has seen many things in the last 13 years, but he says the signs of change that he has noticed recently give him real hope. After years of civil war, Yemen is now largely at peace. The country’s mood is one of optimism and change. In this highly traditional society, there is an openness in Yemen which almost surprises the visitor. Strong community and social networks prevail but they permit and increasingly encourage learning and the adoption of new and innovative approaches.

The prospects for Yemen are good – but only if people are given chances. In daily life, the vast majority of the country’s inhabitants do not have access to the minimum standards which, according to the Sphere project, are essential for leading a life with dignity. Less than half of the population has access to basic public health services, and the availability of water is well below the average of Middle Eastern countries. The literacy rate among women and girls is around 35 per cent and 53 per cent



The old – traditional Yemeni buildings in Sana’a, restored with the help of UNESCO – incorporates the new – a satellite dish on the roof.

for men and boys¹. Yemen has the fourth fastest-growing population in the world, but its economy is growing at a much slower pace.

Achieving Sphere minimum standards in Yemen could be seen as a developmental objective and not, as Sphere’s creators initially imagined, as life-saving measures in the event of disaster.

Doing a lot with little

Yet, as is so often the case, people learn to do a lot with little. The International Federation provided one Sphere training course to staff and volunteers of the Yemen Red Crescent Society in 2005. Although only 30 people attended, the effects have been far-reaching. Since the training, a volunteer from the Sana’a branch talks regularly about Sphere standards with his family and friends. He is convinced that Sphere can be used in daily life, especially the information on water and sanitation. Elias, head of volunteers at the Sana’a branch and lecturer at the University of Sana’a, now includes Sphere in his engineering classes and is trying to encourage university directors to establish Sphere as a standard text book for the curricula. Short brochures and posters on Sphere have been produced by the volunteers to help explain the project to local people in simple terms. This is an important step, given the complexity of the manual.

Sphere standards have also been used by volunteers to organize disaster response operations – in innovative ways. In response to the tensions between local tribes in the northern governorate of Sada’a, volunteers prepared their own rations according to Sphere so that they would be able to share some of the same problems as the local people. In conjunction with the International Committee of the Red Cross, Sphere standards were also used as a benchmark to calculate rations for women in prisons in Syria.

¹source: www.undp.org.ye/education.php

Yet so much more can and needs to be done. The volunteers in every branch visited by the assessment team were frustrated that things were moving so slowly. They insisted that more training sessions and more dissemination on Sphere need to take place as soon as possible. Each branch owns only one or, at most, two copies of the Sphere handbook. Thanks to efforts by the International Federation, the new Sphere manual is now available in Arabic but even a year after production, copies have probably reached no more than 5 per cent of National Societies staff. Indeed, for most Yemen Red Crescent Society staff and volunteers, this was the first time they had heard about Sphere. The support provided by the International Federation on promoting Sphere in Yemen in 2005 was not insignificant but needs to be seen as a drop in the ocean. For people so eager to learn and with so much work to be done, it is a shame not to be able to provide more.

Challenges of participation – mobilizing female volunteers

Applying Sphere's universal minimum standards to local contexts is part of the challenge. In Yemen, perhaps one of the biggest challenges concerns the level of equal participation of men and women in Red Crescent activities. In a country where women have a traditionally restricted role in social and political life, the inclusion of female volunteers in Red Crescent activities is not something that can be taken for granted. Women may not be allowed to travel without the company of a male family member. If they participate in a training session or a disaster response workshop, they are often expected to be accompanied by a male relative. This is not always practical, or even possible. Perhaps partly as a result of



Yemen Red Crescent Society volunteers taking part in a Sphere training session.

these restrictions, women have tended to become more involved in the Red Crescent's primary health care activities which often take place in their local branch office. Yet, many women are becoming increasingly interested in disaster management. A few female volunteers were mobilized recently to help respond to flooding in Hodeidah and Hajjah governorates and to a situation of ethnic tension in Sada'a. However, the proportion of male to female volunteers in the National Society is still about 5 to 1. The Yemen Red Crescent Society's leadership recognizes the need to facilitate equal and active participation of women in their activities but emphasizes that this has to be done in a way which respects Yemeni traditions.

Making sense of it all

It is important to note that the difficulty of applying Sphere's disaster management standards in Yemen is not caused only by the context of the country but also by the manual itself. "The book is really very difficult – we need a lot of work to try and understand it" was a comment expressed by many volunteers. Indeed, their comment probably reflects the feeling of many Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers around the world.

Sphere is a multidisciplinary technical manual put together by highly educated people. However, in a country where 65 per cent of women are illiterate, one cannot assume that the manual will be easily understood, let alone applied. Work needs to be done with and by National Societies in terms of dissemination and in making the manual understood in simple terms. The handbook is complex and, although some chapters are accessible for generalists, others require specialist knowledge. Drawing on their own experience of using the manual, volunteers of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent put together a simplified version of the Sphere manual in Arabic which is now being distributed to all National Societies in the Middle East and North Africa. This is one example of translating a great idea into a tool that is simpler and more accessible for Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers. In Yemen, Sphere standards have barely started to penetrate the work of headquarters, let alone the branches. Much more training, advocacy, education and support needs to be given before staff and volunteers of the Yemen Red Crescent Society can confidently declare that they are able to meet the needs of disaster-affected communities according to the Sphere minimum standards.

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