

Remarks by Christine Knudsen, Director, Sphere

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24 November 2016

Thank you for the invitation to join the panel today on this important occasion. It is perhaps telling of our world today that this ninth session of the Forum on Minority Issues is focused on minorities in situations of humanitarian crisis.

The number of people affected by humanitarian crisis has almost doubled in the past decade. The UN estimates that more than 87 million people require humanitarian aid in dozens of countries today. Of those, some 12.4 million people are newly displaced in 2015 alone, about 2/3 of them in their own countries.

As the number of people affected by disaster or conflict reaches new highs, it is certainly timely to consider the specific situation of those who may be disenfranchised, at heightened risk, and with fewer resources for protection and action.

Even without the testimonies which we have heard already today, we see reports of minorities across the globe being targeted for abuse and harassment, intentionally forced to flee, and even killed as a strategy of war in conflicts.

Displacement in particular is often triggered from deep underlying and unresolved tensions between majority and minority groups, whether national, ethnic, religious or linguistic. In addition to that, the poor are disproportionately affected in natural disasters, and minorities usually are disproportionately poor, leading to compounded vulnerabilities.

The effects of crisis are many. And they accumulate exponentially as physical and social resources are continuously taxed and exhausted over time.

I find myself in an unusual role on this distinguished panel, that of a non-lawyer and a non-specialist in minority rights. I do hope that I can nonetheless add a useful perspective—that of how we use legal tenets and tools to bring practical solutions to communities in crisis including minorities.

International humanitarian law, refugee law, and disaster law create a powerful framework for the protection and fulfillment of rights—including the principle of non-discrimination and the specific rights of minorities—yet we continue to see this disproportionate impact. What can be done to translate the legal framework into practice?

Sphere was launched by humanitarian practitioners in 1997 to think about this very problem. While initially a voluntary attempt to define common standards, to promote quality and accountability within the humanitarian sector, it has always located this work within a wider legal, ethical and even moral framework.

Indeed, Sphere represented a fundamental shift at the time—away from a pure needs-based

and charitable approach to those in need, towards a rights-based approach based on solidarity and protection of human dignity even in the most challenging crisis environments.

Sphere is therefore not just a manual of good practice and professional standards, but is a statement of rights and duties. It seeks to give concrete meaning to the concepts of the “right to life with dignity” and the “right to humanitarian assistance,” by defining a minimum content of these rights and spelling out their implications for humanitarian practice.

Establishing the content of these rights through agreed standards allow a diverse community of practitioners to agree what quality humanitarian interventions look like. It allows us to be transparent and accountable. Standards help us build predictability and strengthen coordination across a broad range of actors in government, NGO, even military and non-state actors. They help us think about needs assessment, programme design and evaluation in a shared way and make sure we are being as effective and timely as possible. They help us professionalize our work, build capacity, advocate with others, and find common ground for action.

Standards help us think about the gap between what assistance should be to promote life with dignity, compared to what it may be in practice.

In short, standards help us translate principles and rights into practice and programmes.

And while Sphere is widely known and recognized because of its technical standards, it is much more than a manual of good practice and professional standards. The Humanitarian Charter is the actual cornerstone of Sphere, firmly laying the foundations for humanitarian action within a wider framework of social, political, legal and moral relationships.

Within the Charter, we take clear note of the formal relationship which exists between the state and its citizens. The state role is reaffirmed both in its sovereign responsibility and its obligation to provide assistance, or to allow assistance to be provided where it is unable or unwilling to do so.

Sphere recognizes that NGOs have no formal responsibility within the international legal framework, other than the right to offer assistance. And we offer this assistance recognizing the rights of all people to life with dignity and to protection and assistance as reflected in the international legal framework.

The role of civil society in responding to humanitarian crisis is undeniable. It is indeed the combination of formal and voluntary action at the local, national, regional and international levels as appropriate that provides the best chances that assistance is provided effectively, efficiently, and that it is timely and relevant to evolving needs on the ground.

The Humanitarian Charter helps humanitarian practitioners make decisions in support of this approach, considering roles and responsibilities, and the principles which drive this work.

So what does this mean in practice and what does it mean for minorities?

While Sphere does not focus on minority rights specifically, but does articulate the principle of non-discrimination, affirming universal rights and minorities' rights to enjoy their own culture, religion and language. Its Protection Principles note specific vulnerabilities which may accrue to religious or ethnic minority groups. And there is a further call to consider the specific risks of gender-based violence which women and girls belonging to minority groups may face.

Shelter standards urge consideration of demographics including specific attention to minority groups which may have distinct household sizes and shelter requirements. Health standards specifically note the need to ensure staff represent the diversity of the population served, including recruiting staff from minority groups to improve access. Food security and livelihoods standards note the need to ensure economic access to markets, including where access may be restricted due to the political and security environment and/or cultural and religious considerations which could restrict minority access to these resources.

While this is far from exhaustive, the underlying humanitarian principle of impartiality—providing assistance on the basis of need alone—requires that humanitarian actors respond in a way that considers the needs of all people affected by a crisis as they determine priorities.

The exclusion of minorities from humanitarian assistance—or unintentionally reinforcing obstacles to their access to such assistance—undermines this fundamental principle and contributes to discrimination rather than supporting recovery. To advance humanitarian quality and accountability, non-discrimination and inclusion of all vulnerable groups is essential. Intersecting forms of discrimination must be recognized, and addressed.

Sphere was established with two fundamental beliefs at its core: that all of those affected by crisis have a right to life with dignity and that all possible steps must be taken to alleviate suffering in these crises. This clearly is an inclusive approach which also recognizes specific vulnerabilities and specific capacities of minorities.

While Sphere gives practical guidance to help make this approach a reality on the ground, we know there is always more work to be done to improve humanitarian action.

Sphere will be launching a review of the standards early next year, and I invite you to join that conversation as we consult thousands of humanitarian practitioners, government representatives, civil society organizations, and others to ensure that an integrated and inclusive approach emerges stronger than ever.

Together we can build a stronger application of the legal and normative frameworks in practice and improve the lives of minorities and of all those most in need.

Thank you.