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The Sphere Project and Sphere Courses:

A standardised way to train and prepare humanitarian workers

A broad-based international study revealed that the unqualified and unprofessional action of many humanitarian aid organisations in the refugee camps of Goma in 1994 led to too many unnecessary deaths. Triggered by the genocide in Rwanda, millions of people had fled to adjacent Zaire, and there they had to be cared for in gigantic refugee camps.

What makes the Sphere-Project, which was a direct result of the atrocities of the Rwanda crisis so special is that it consists of more than 200 organisations around the world which all aim at improving the quality and trustworthiness of humanitarian aid and at making it more transparent and efficient. In 2004 the latest version of the Sphere handbook was published, which contains information based on ten years of specific experience. It states the minimum of standards for the fields of water supply, hygiene, nutrition, food supply, housing and camp organisation, as well as health care. These standards are complemented with codes and explanations, which facilitate the correct use of these standards and make sure that they are actually used for project planning and the monitoring of effects. A major part of the book, however, is dedicated to the “Humanitarian Charter”. The “Humanitarian Charter“ is a guideline as well as a commitment for humanitarian aid organisations, and is based on international refugee law, human rights agreements and the Geneva Conventions.

The Sphere project, which was officially launched in 1997, has turned out to be a plain success because Sphere standards today are considered an internationally acknowledged benchmark. The Sphere handbook is a must for all outgoing humanitarian helpers and is a rich resource of information on everyday routine questions in the fields of emergency aid and reconstruction. Evaluations and expert reports in these fields have started using the indicators and standards of the Sphere project as a direct reference. Up to date nine ToT (trainer of trainers) courses and more than 30 “interagency workshops“ have been held around the world and many organisations make use of the training modules of the Sphere project to prepare and train their staff.

Sphere Courses are aimed at preparing humanitarian missions, discussing current humanitarian issues and supporting organisations with consensus building. Moreover they are

a valuable and much appreciated tool for quality improvement. They convey not only the use of practical guidelines but also the planning and coordination of humanitarian missions. Issues of human rights, international law and the sometimes quite complex field of political surroundings of humanitarian aid are also considered in the courses. The ample teaching material for the existing training modules can be used flexibly. The focal points of the courses are 1) fundamental knowledge and context of humanitarian aid, 2) regulations of international law and the “Humanitarian Charter“, 3) assessment and analysis of situations, planning and project cycles, 4) disaster prevention as well as preparation for crises and disasters. All participants are methodically integrated. The modules of the course are also very well adapted to be used directly in the area of crisis, for training and project planning with local staff or partners.