

**THE DANGERS AND INCONSISTENCIES OF NORMATIVE  
APPROACHES TO HUMANITARIAN AID**

**SUMMARY OF REFLECTIONS RAISED**

**François Grünewald, Véronique de Geoffroy, Groupe  
URD**

**DECEMBER 1999**

**Table of contents**

PREAMBLE

INTRODUCTION

Positioning

Presentation of the process

History of the mobilisation

FIRST PART: TECHNICAL ARGUMENT

1. Definitive standards for perpetually changing situations?
2. Standards applicable in emergency situations?
3. Exit strategies and adaptation of programmes
4. Who can judge the technical quality of the response and how can this quality be measured
5. Criteria, standards, indicators

SECOND PART: LEGAL ARGUMENT

1. Absence of legal assizes
2. The SPHERE and OMBUDSMAN projects with regards to SOFT Law, codes of conduct and ISO standards. Compilation of indicators or legal standards in gestation?

THIRD PART: POLITICAL ARGUMENT

1. NGOs, service providers or subcontractors
2. Or force of opposition and proposition
3. Are these two approaches compatible?

FOURTH PART: COUNTER-PROPOSITIONS

## CONCLUSION

## PREAMBLE

*" To any complicated problem there exists a  
simple solution and it is inevitably a bad one "*

*Montesquieu*

The starting point of the reflection led by Groupe URD and a number of humanitarian actors who support it, some of them present in the field for more than twenty years, and several of whom have received Nobel Prizes, is the imperious need to respect crisis victims' dignity.

This means, first of all, recognising their singularities: it is effectively in the singular meeting of two human beings, one suffering, the other wishing to help him, that humanity, the first principle of humanitarian action, is born.

It is also in the recognition of their diversity that a relationship of respect is born. Each situation is different, each human group has its rules, its culture, its criteria. The concept of " average victim " is not only an aberration in operational terms (everyone does not have the same nutritional needs, the same needs in water, the same needs in blankets, depending on conditions, gender, age, culture, etc.), it is first and above all a denial of dignity. To reply in the best possible manner to the needs of each, not in a standardised way but in an adapted way; there lies the foundation of the principle of impartiality.

Our position is neither utopian nor naive. The pursuit of beneficiary participation and the desire to listen to the famous " voice of beneficiaries ", must, indeed, not make us lose awareness that these beneficiaries are, like all societies, structured by relationships of power, relationships of oppression, relationships of exploitation, in brief social relationships. Those who suffer are not necessarily devoid of ulterior political motives, as are those who help them or who pretend to regulate aid. Is such discourse " politically incorrect "? Yet ... in this search of dialogue, more than one has been manipulated. From this capacity to listen, based on an in-depth analysis of situations and the power relations, follows the principle of independence.

A human being is neither a stomach to fill, nor a head to shelter, nor a mouth to moisten, nor a body to clothe. It is, at the same time, all of these and much more. To respond to calls for help from those who have lost everything because of war, floods or a lava flow, means, first of all, to revert to the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. At a time when a certain discourse on aid, one which promotes a homogenised, unique and consumerist approach to humanitarian assistance, is gaining increasing ground, it is important to react. One must be able to do so by reverting to the true stakes and challenges of humanitarian aid.

## INTRODUCTION

This document presents, in a synthetic manner, a number of issues recently addressed by Groupe URD and some of its members, in reaction to projects currently underway; the SPHERE project on minimum humanitarian standards and the setting up of an OMBUDSMAN. If mobilisation on these subjects has been and remains important, it is because a number of humanitarian actors (mainly French) are extremely worried about the long-term dynamics underlying these two projects. On several occasions, the debate has been hot because the stakes are important for the future of humanitarian assistance. At this stage it was important to review the developed arguments in order to present them in a synthetic form.

### ***Positioning***

Firstly, we wish to emphasize that Groupe URD and the NGOs mobilised on these issues are working towards the same objectives as the initiators of the SPHERE and OMBUDSMAN projects: the quality of humanitarian assistance for the benefit of victims, and the accountability of aid providers. For the authors of this paper, this commitment has been translated in several years of work: research, collective discussion and debates, training, evaluations, lobbying, etc. There remains, however, much to do in this domain and it is necessary to mobilise efforts and resources in order to reach, in the long run, this "quality objective". However, though the final objective is indeed the same, the methods employed are fundamentally different.

### ***Presentation of the process***

The analysis of these two projects was carried around four main themes. First, arguments of a technical nature are presented to show how the minimum standards do not guarantee better quality of assistance, on the contrary. Second, a legal study of the SPHERE and OMBUDSMAN procedures was undertaken which highlights certain inconsistencies and severe risks of deviation. Thirdly, arguments relative to "political" positions are presented, emphasising the fundamental divergence between two trends of thought having different visions of humanitarian assistance and of the role of humanitarian NGOs. Finally, counterpropositions are developed in order to open other potential roads towards reaching the "quality objective".

### ***History of the mobilisation process***

Since 1966, a few voices had timidly made themselves heard within certain organisations against the tendencies of standardisation which were beginning to emerge. It is only in the summer of 1998 that the SPHERE project, at that time in a non-finalised version, gave rise to the first reactions from French NGOs. A first document, focused essentially on technical arguments, was written collectively by Médecins Du Monde, Médecins sans Frontières, Action Contre la Faim and Groupe URD and sent to the SPHERE committee in September 1998. In December 1998, on the day when phase 2 was launched in London, a mobilisation tried to raise its cause for concern in order to spur a wider debate. The positioning of MSF International and ICVA were very close to that of Groupe URD. Still in December 1998, new exchanges allowed the position of the ICRC to appear more clearly, in an excellent article by Doctor Pierre Perrin. The debate was again carried forward with the publication of an article in "Revue des Questions Humanitaires" in the spring of 1999. At the beginning of 1999 a one-day meeting was organised in Paris, jointly by ACF and Groupe URD, inviting several members of the SPHERE Project co-ordination team, to try to examine these reflections more closely. Early in the summer of 1999, having learnt that the two projects were continuing to

progress without apparently taking into consideration nor even mentioning that an alternative and conflicting discourse exists, Groupe URD decided to continue its work and launched a study, with a team of lawyers, on the legal validity of the two projects.

## **FIRST PART: TECHNICAL ARGUMENTS**

The SPHERE standards have above all raised many questions of a technical nature:

### ***1. Definitive standards for perpetually changing situations?***

The standards do not take into account the cultural diversity and the changing nature of situations and crises. Serious doubts on their validity as "definitive standards" have been raised, since they only apply in fact to particularly ideal (and therefore rarely seen) refugee camp conditions. The processes of standardisation and homogenisation risk, in the long run, killing imagination, which is so much necessary in a continuously changing world. As elsewhere there is a risk of promoting "a unique way of thinking". It will give the final power of decision to the donors and the SPHERE project risks turning against its authors.

Certainly standards have been used for a long time by NGOs such as MSF, ACF and MDM, who are recognised for their professionalism and who have developed criteria and standards throughout their many years of existence. They have ensured that the validity of these standards depended on the nature of the situations. Contrary to what the people defending the SPHERE project claim, there is no standard, even minimum, which is applicable in all circumstances and at all times.

### ***1. Standards applicable in emergency situations?***

Four pre-conditions attached to each category of standards greatly limits the scope of validity of the SPHERE Minimum Standards and thus the value of these standards. If nobody questions the first one (which refers to humanitarian ethics), the following three lead one to seriously wonder what course to follow: the standards apply only if the necessary resources are available. They are only applicable if standards in other sectors of intervention are themselves put into place. Finally security conditions must be met and one must really be able to work for the responsibility clause to be valid. If one considers humanitarian experience over the past twenty years, one is aware that the very existence of these three conditions excludes most of the humanitarian crises from the scope of use of the standards. What could be done in the 80's in Afghanistan? What were the options during the Krajiana exodus? Who could stay and work in Rwanda in April 1994? What types of activities could be put into place in situations such as the flee of refugees in Zaire at the end of 1996? Who could work presently in the bush of Sierra Leone and on what programmes?

### ***1. Exit strategies and adaptation of programmes***

It is often much more difficult to leave a situation and to finish a programme of humanitarian assistance than to apply technical standards. It is often then, when the crisis seems to come to an end or when the perpetuation of this crisis requires adaptations, that the problems arise. It is in the implementation of humanitarian actions in constantly changing situations that one must show a sense of creativeness. Giving less nutritional assistance to encourage agricultural

recovery, avoiding the settlement of refugees or displaced populations in conditions far superior, in fact, to those of the host population such that one quickly encounters security incidents. Certain locally identified solutions can easily be outside or apparently below the SPHERE standards; agricultural answers to nutritional problems, land ownership answers to shelter problems... How are these problems taken into consideration? The SPHERE Project deliberately excludes phases of rehabilitation and survival activities from its ...."sphere of interest ".

This choice not to take into consideration the question of the links between relief-rehabilitation and development is in flagrant contradiction with all research concerning humanitarian action these last few years. In addition it is contrary to article 2.1 of the Humanitarian Charter integrated to the Minimum Standards, which recognises that " it is firstly through their own efforts that the basic needs of people affected by calamity or armed conflict are met".

#### ***4- Who can judge the technical quality of the reply and how can this quality be measured?***

Different approaches exist, from the ISO method (checking that assistance corresponds to pre-established regulations), to truly participatory methods (which verify whether the response is adapted to needs), sometimes accompanied by a focus on potential negative impacts of assistance (non-desired secondary effects). Finally southern and eastern NGOs risk being *de facto* excluded from having access to funding, as these standards often do not belong to their culture nor to their knowledge of local conditions.

Is it thinkable that an independent entity can have the capacity to grasp the value of technical "complaints and criticisms" in all the technical fields covered by SPHERE? If the reply to this question is " yes " (this is the opinion of the supporters of the OMBUDSMAN project), then the size and the competence of this entity would necessarily be important and costly.

In any case, this OMBUDSMAN should not be based on the SPHERE Project because standardisation is not compatible with approaches that would be participatory and adapted to each situation. Even though each chapter of the SPHERE Standards starts with a reminder of the importance of the ex-ante evaluation and of the necessary participation of the populations, these are, in fact, contradicted by the promotion of standardised responses.

#### ***5. Criteria, standards, indicators***

Finally, what does one measure with the SPHERE standards and what will be the role of the OMBUDSMAN concerning its responsibility to ensure the standards and codes of conduct are respected? Are we measuring whether the response meets beneficiaries needs? No, if what the latter ask for is neither the standard ration, nor the standard shelter, but rather support for their survival strategies during the crisis? No, if the cold is such that the needs in calories are far higher than the SPHERE standards. No, if the distribution of water points needed by the women (a social and cultural need) does not allow the realisation of the SPHERE standard.

Furthermore, if the reference, so frequently made today, to the Hippocratic principle " first do no harm " is acceptable, what would it mean if applied to the SPHERE project itself? Whose

interests does it really serve? Those of beneficiaries? Those of large northern agencies? Those of the donors?

## SECOND PART: LEGAL ARGUMENT

Many points concerning legal claims and the real basis of the SPHERE and OMBUDSMAN projects are underlined here:

### *1. Absence of legal assizes*

By recalling in its preamble the fundamental rights of the human being, can the SPHERE project claim any legal assizes? Though one can draw inspiration from the spirit and philosophy of the contents of the Law, does it give one the legitimacy to define normative procedures? As Peter Walker explains " the SPHERE project attempts to construct an edifice the foundations of which are the fundamental rights of the human being... **The humanitarian charter and the minimum standards of the SPHERE Project establish an evident link between, on the one hand, the fundamental rights of the human being and the humanitarian principles**, and, on the other hand, **services** like the supply of water, hygiene, food, nutritional assistance, shelters or health care ". But is it acceptable to mix and confuse rules of law and technical standards, putting them on the same level? Lawyers do not accept the imprecision, and furthermore one should have a definition or, at least, an explication of what is understood by " humanitarian principles ". And what is " the evidence " for this link? What is its legal value?

Indeed, nothing seems clear in the SPHERE Project at a legal level. The SPHERE Project certainly has the worthy intention of guaranteeing the effective respect of essential rights but, *in fine*, only invents a new tool – the relevance of which remains to be discussed – which is in no way connected to the legal " foundations " of international law. Two major elements must immediately be put forward.

#### ➤ *The legal status of NGOs*

A well-established phenomenon is that NGOs constitute, in some way, a right of association on an international scale, which has sometimes led them to be qualified as international associations or international agencies. This designation shows the scope of the action these organisations intend to run, but it does not correspond to a relevant legal designation of the status of NGOs nor does it define what type of legal entity they are. NGOs therefore come under internal law. They have the status of legal entities in private law (except under certain legislation such as in Belgium, Portugal, Austria, Lithuania and in Ukraine). Two consequences of this legal designation must be underlined:

- The first, obvious : the instigators of the SPHERE and OMBUDSMAN projects are not instances authorised to create the rule of international law ;
- The second, essential: it is difficult to imagine, at the international level, the legal responsibility of an entity that does not exist in the international normative structure.

In the long run one can fear that states could discard their own responsibility in crisis situations. In addition to the lack of legal logic there is the lack of realism concerning political situations which NGOs are far from being able to control. The paradox of SPHERE is that it briefly evokes the responsibility of states without, however, clearly indicating how it must be taken into account.

- *Non legal mechanisms of responsibility*

Questions raised on the accountability of NGOs in the 'SPHERE project', which are widely taken up and reinforced by the OMBUDSMAN project, including their foundations and application, are neither sufficiently precise nor pertinent for their application to be envisaged legally. Three major problems appear at this level:

1. *Indeed, on what rule is this based? Can one invoke the rights of the victim?*

The important doctrinal debate around the notion of " the right to assistance " emerges here. The acknowledgement of states' sovereignty in international law prevents one from giving total credit to this worthy intention. However, States have committed themselves to respect certain obligations contained in the Geneva Conventions and its protocols. To ensure they are effectively respected is not an easy mission, although it is legally set forward and which must be carried out. The SPHERE and OMBUDSMAN projects also evoke the possibility of putting this responsibility into place at the request of other NGOs, even of journalists... again, on the basis of the rights of the victim?

1. *Who is responsible?*

Let us recall that it is impossible to consider a NGO as a subject of international law; it is therefore impossible to legally isolate " a responsible ". Furthermore the humanitarian actors are multiple, and in order to be rigorous, the responsibility of each one should be considered. Depending on the situation, the humanitarian actors can be organisations coming from a state controlled authority, the army or even private companies (Vivendi)... Are they concerned by the SPHERE standards? According to the logic of the project: yes, since the project puts forward the position of the rights of the victim. Consequently the latter should be able to take advantage of his rights regardless of which humanitarian actor is involved. The positive outcome of the project seems very debatable. Furthermore who will be held responsible? Individuals (technicians, programme managers) or the structures? How will the SPHERE standards then be transcribed again in the law concerning employment or the employment of humanitarian workers, a law which is, above all, a national law?

1. *With which sanction mechanisms ?*

No element whatsoever in the project allows one to envisage which authority is entitled to judge the non-respect of the standards. The OMBUDSMAN project raises more questions than it brings solutions...How can one ensure the impartiality of an international mediator? Can one consider a mediator at a national level? How can the breach in the project's potential obligations be assessed? What is the type of sanction envisaged?

To refer to international legal texts is not the same thing as submitting rules of law. SPHERE can not claim to have the slightest legal rigour. The desire to improve the work of NGOs is, nevertheless, most interesting and respectable, but other methods are then conceivable and a rights-based approach may not be the best medium. However, though the SPHERE project cannot claim to be law or rest on any legal foundations, could it, at length, become so?

***2- The SPHERE and OMBUDSMAN projects with regard to Soft Law, codes of conduct and ISO standards. Compilation of indicators or legal standards in gestation?***

- *Soft Law?*

*Soft law* is a term whose content is only vaguely defined and still much debated. Whether this or that arrangement is referred to as " soft ", " flexible ", " green ", " tender " or " in gestation ", there is no law created by entities without an international legal personality (N.G.O.) and without the consent of states: article 38 of the International Court of Justice Statutes, the Vienna Convention on the law concerning treaties (23<sup>rd</sup> May 1969), and the jurisprudence of the International Court of Justice are unanimous. Any other interpretation is only doctrinal and therefore not in conformity with existing law.

The examples which have motivated the elaboration of this concept form a set of precedents which amount to facts, and not law. This reminds us of the distinction: " practice is evidence, custom is the law itself ". In fact there is here neither treaty nor custom, as only states can be at the origin of such sources of law.

- *Codes of conduct?*

The reference of codes of conduct has also been envisaged to present the SPHERE Project. Codes of conduct developed by private persons govern relationships between them in a voluntary manner and have no normative value under international law. NGOs' codes of conduct were no doubt the first vectors of these associations' accountability, in so far as they have served as reference to humanitarian action on a methodological and ethical ground. They are sometimes presented as the forerunner of the rule of law. But one must not be led to conclude that NGOs have any normative power.

The role of NGOs has been recognised on the " international scene ": they contribute to relay a " an unorganised public opinion ", and sometimes in a striking manner. Their contributions to the evolution of international society is sometimes recognised by states themselves. The mobilisation of NGOs at the Rio and Ottawa conferences, for the treaty of Rome for the International Criminal Court, and, more recently, against the Worldwide Trade Organisation, are there to prove it. But the conventional consecration is indeed the affair of states. The ICRC's mandate has been officially recognised by the Geneva Conventions, which therefore gives it a different status from that of NGOs on the international scene. Without this state recognition it is impossible to be able to speak of legal normative action.

In order for the SPHERE Project to be able one day to have the designation of " standard of international law ", the only possibility to consider is that of its consecration within a treaty. And even then the project must have enough support from all NGOs so as to try and acquire state recognition. And even then the project must effectively interest states... At this stage of



the study we observe that it is impossible to legally qualify the SPHERE project. However any qualification is far from being impossible to legally define the SPHERE Project.

Nevertheless, in our attempt to adequately name the standards proposed in the SPHERE Project, our investigations have led us in particular to the internet site of the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO), an NGO set up in 1947, which federates national organisms of standardisation in the fields of industry and services in about 130 countries.

- *Or ISO standards*

The comparative study of standards such as those proposed by SPHERE and the quality standards called " ISO standards " enables one to note that the former are a direct product of the latter. The definition of the ISO standard proposed by the International Organisation of Standardisation is the following: " standards are well-documented agreements containing technical specifications or other precise criteria intended to be systematically used as rules, guidelines or definition of characteristics to ensure that construction materials, products, processes and services are apt to be used ". It is also specified that " international standards in this way contribute to make our lives easier and to increase the accuracy and efficiency of goods and services that we use ". The ISO standards (especially ISO 9000) are tools that enable one to ensure that the materials, products, processes and services are suitable for the job. They are valuable assistance for the improvement of management in firms.

Despite its claim of being a rights-based approach, the SPHERE project does not correspond to a legal logic, but to a consumerist logic of optimisation of service quality, such as that proposed in the ISO standards. Moreover, this is also in the interest of donors. It improves their image with regard to the public and facilitates their work by giving them a simple structure to eliminate humanitarian candidates. We may be headed towards a " SPHERE label " of quality, which could, in the long run, be disastrous for humanitarian commitment.

From then on, the relevance of the project is no longer a question for lawyers, but the executives, humanitarian aid workers. SPHERE cannot claim to use the restricting aspect of legally-defined rules; it can only position itself as the simple compilation of technical indicators with a strictly indicative value.

### **THIRD PART: POLITICAL ARGUMENT**

The underlying questions which arise for humanitarian organisations through these debates are of course of a political nature: are they service providers, in charge of a technical activity, sub-contractors to government or multilateral agencies (ECHO, HCR, PAM, etc.), these famous " implementing partners "? or are NGOs an expression of civil society, a militant opposition force, still capable of rebelling against the different forms of power which undermine the most vulnerable?

#### **1. *NGO, service provider or subcontractor***

Already, through the establishment of certain relationships with donors over the past few years, the position of humanitarian NGOs is sliding towards an instrumentalisation and contracting of activities. At the same time, the dynamics of structural adjustments

programmes initiated by the Bretton Wood Institutions are pushing towards the withdrawal of the state. In some areas (for example Angola in 1997), NGOs found themselves "responsible" for increasingly important technical domains, such as the provision of healthcare for populations of an entire region, in the framework of an agreement between the donors and the government of Angola. This reality placed them in a difficult position with regards to authorities and populations, and relationships were more in the field of service provision than of voluntary engagement. This phenomenon has a tendency to become current and raises the question of the role of states. It reflects a growing trend of liberalisation and privatisation of services. There lies the fundamental difference hidden behind the double denomination PVO (Private Voluntary Agency) in use in the English-speaking environment, especially North America, and NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation). Are we gradually going towards PGOs (Para-governmental Organisations)?

In such situations, where does one find the starting point and the liberty to speak out in a given situation? By accepting to play a role of this nature, NGOs are losing their capacity to lobby and take strong political positions, since they are accepting "to play by somebody's rules" and to be assigned a specific place. It is very much to be feared that the SPHERE and OMBUDSMAN projects, by reinforcing the responsibility of ONGs in this manner, only accentuate this phenomenon and end up placing humanitarian actors as service providers definitely, with all that it entails in terms of political interference in their activities and of institutional dependence.

### *1. Or force of opposition and proposition*

For the representatives of a more political and sometimes radical approach to humanitarian assistance, the objectives of aid lie above a mere technical service. For some NGOs, humanitarian assistance is only the visible side of a much deeper commitment towards the populations: a presence and solidarity that enables them to testify if the people responsible are not neglecting their obligations. Humanitarian assistance would only be a incomplete last resort (humanitarian intervention being seen as necessary momentarily when authorities have failed to fulfil their obligations towards populations) if it is not coupled with the imperative of protection (ensured in various ways by the different actors –ICRC for negotiation – NGOs for testimony –human rights experts for denunciation).

Certainly the position of NGOs as an opposition force was easier and simpler before the end of the Cold War and the appearance on a large scale of state-controlled humanitarian action. Today being an opposition force is much more difficult and, in the humanitarian domain, it is rendered far more complex, when states start to occupy this field of action. This is why it is easier to speak of "proposition force". However this implies independence with regard to the authorities, a radically different position from that of "service providers".

### *1. Are these two approaches compatible?*

Are the two approaches above, service provider or opposition force, compatible or are they mutually exclusive? According to the authors of this paper, it appears that these two positions are difficult to reconcile. For those who consider themselves as service providers, the overall objective then becomes the fulfilment of contractual obligations to which they have committed themselves (standards), whereas for the others the final objective of humanitarian

action is elsewhere and inevitably entails a political stance. In this sense the evaluation carried out by ACF in Burundi is greatly significant: according to the SPHERE criteria, the mission of the therapeutic feeding centres is graded 20/20. The SPHERE criteria are attained and the NGO can consider that it has accomplished its work and duties towards the beneficiary populations. However for ACF the mission is not satisfactory. In fact only the people who can arrive at the centres are cared for, whereas the rest of the population, and certainly the most vulnerable, are inaccessible in the insecurity zones in the forest. ACF does not have the access to the victims it wished for, and this is because of political reasons.

#### **FOURTH PART: COUNTER-PROPOSITIONS**

In the introduction of the present note it has been mentioned that the search for quality was indeed the common objective of the promoters as well as the detractors of the SPHERE and OMBUDSMAN projects.

If the preceding chapters have essentially criticised the technical approaches to improving the quality of humanitarian interventions, through standardisation, it is necessary to make propositions and to identify alternatives.

Six complementary axes seem to emerge:

- Quality by reverting to the political ethics of humanitarian action: Let us recall that assistance is only the response to a failure of protection. The question of nutrition is therefore not essentially in the number of calories or in the balance of the ration in micro-nutriments. It is first of all in the call to respect International Humanitarian Law.
- Quality by enhancing the participation of populations: and this from the needs assessment phases to impact evaluation. It is necessary that processes of consultation take place, but not in a naive manner and for other reasons than simply paying lip-service.
- Quality by the refusal of an unhealthy relationship between humanitarians and donor: How many times have actions been put into place under pressure of donors, who responded too late and gave unrealistic disbursement time frames? How many times have these donors accepted to finance poorly identified, poorly elaborated and hardly adapted projects?
- 
- Quality by reverting to professional ethics: Wanting to do good and sometimes doing harm, field workers must revert to Hippocrates' first aphorism: "First, do not harm", without being paralysed by it.

- Quality by the improvement of needs assessments: This will necessarily take place through the development of finer and more adapted methods of context analysis, taking into account the diversity of contexts, the diversity of crisis impacts on populations, and the diversity of populations' survival strategies. This implies a strengthening of listening capacities, of partnerships with local actors, as well as methods of geopolitical and institutional analysis.
- Quality by the promotion of an ex-post evaluation culture: There again methodological research work is necessary, because a large amount of tools available to field workers come from the development world.
- Quality by training of field workers: Last of all the quality of interventions will depend on that of the aid workers in the field: good knowledge and skills for needs assessments and impact evaluation, good capacity for dialogue and listening, with a serious aptitude to keep a distance, and finally strengthened abilities in the relevant technical fields. At length this is what will make the difference between good quality or poor quality interventions.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the quality of interventions goes through a whole series of measures. Amongst these criteria and standards seem to be one of the useful tools, but certainly not the most important nor the most relevant. To put them forward and to give them enormous importance entails the risk of forgetting the rest, which could turn out to have very serious and harmful consequences.

## ETHICAL REFERENCES

Planning

Analysis of situations Implementation

Evaluation of needs

Training Monitoring &

**System of Evaluation**

**quality assurance**

Development of rules Programme

and strategies evaluation

(impacts, effects,

relevance, effectiveness...)

Standards and

references

### **DONOR PRESSURE**

*Diagram adapted from "Quality at each level", Dr Pierre Perrin, ICRC, 98.*

It is necessary to put priorities back in their place. Since the supporters of the SPHERE and OMBUDSMAN projects highlight the responsibility and accountability of humanitarian actors, one can question the usefulness of the considerable means mobilised for their own procedures, when these give primacy to technical standards in the elaboration of the quality of humanitarian intervention. It is not impossible that history will remember these initiatives as a major intellectual error.