



GOVERNING HUMANITARIAN STANDARDS:

A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP, FUNDING, AND SYSTEM SUSTAINABILITY

**Authored by
Thomas Stork**

Global Emergency Advisor and CCCM Sector Lead,
Danish Refugee Council (2021-2025)

August 2025



Table of contents

Summary	01
---------	----

Background and methodology	02
----------------------------	----

Standards as a common framework for coordination and quality in humanitarian response	03
---	----

Administration of Humanitarian Guidance	06
--	----

Main findings

Humanitarian Standards Management	08
-----------------------------------	----

Funding for Humanitarian Standards	13
------------------------------------	----

Conclusion and recommendations	16
--------------------------------	----

Appendices

Appendix 1	18
------------	----

Appendix 2	21
------------	----

Appendix 3	24
------------	----



Summary

At the beginning of 2025, research was conducted to examine the governance and leadership of international humanitarian standards. The study investigated the lifecycle of standards – how they are created, governed, funded, and periodically updated – with a focus on the institutions and processes that ensure their relevance and credibility. The resulting report gives recommendations on how to further the work of governing and managing standards, particularly given the turmoil created by [‘the humanitarian reset’](#).

Although not part of the research, later incorporated analysis on the significant impact of a major donor's retreat from humanitarian programming. This development was deemed highly relevant to both standards-setting organisations and operational actors delivering assistance. Despite the differences in guidance, the findings offer a clear pattern of siloed governance of humanitarian standards, as well as opportunities for how joint funding and structural models that if taken collaboratively could benefit each of the respective standards. The study is intended to inform and guide, particularly those standards bodies seeking to establish or strengthen their governance frameworks.

Background and methodology

Six interviews covering seven of the nine international humanitarian standards were conducted. The interviews used semi-structured, open-ended questions. Following the completion of the interviews, interview notes were transcribed, and basic analysis and trend spotting was conducted. Further research of existing documentation and studies was conducted, and a reference list is included at the end of the document to further triangulate the findings of the interviews. The interviews took place through March and April 2025. The broad research questions for the study:

- How are humanitarian standards governed?
 - How is this documented and maintained?
 - How are governing or steering bodies created?
 - What challenges and opportunities are created by the governance model used by the standard?
- How are humanitarian standards funded?

The seven international humanitarian standards interviewed were:

- [SPHERE](#) - Sphere, starts with the Humanitarian Charter and covers Shelter and Settlements; Health; Food and Nutrition; Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion.
- [MERS](#) - Minimum Economic Recovery Standards
- [MSCM](#) - Minimum Standards in Camp Management
- [CPMS](#) - Child Protection Minimum Standards
- [LEGS](#) - Livestock in Emergency Guidelines and Standards
- [SEADS](#) - Standards Supporting Crop-related Livelihoods in Emergencies
- [HIS](#) - Humanitarian Inclusion Standards for older people and people with disabilities

A short history of each standard is provided as an annex.

Standards as a common framework for coordination and quality in humanitarian response

All major humanitarian standards handbooks take their foundational principles from the Sphere Handbook, specifically the Humanitarian Charter, which asserts three core rights: the right to life with dignity, the right to humanitarian assistance, and the right to protection. These principles serve as the ethical and operational cornerstone for standards across sectors and organisations.

Originally established in 1997 as the Sphere Project by a coalition of humanitarian non-governmental organisations and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Sphere was developed to improve the quality of humanitarian response and ensure accountability to affected populations. Humanitarian standards are essential benchmarks that ensure quality, accountability, and dignity in crisis response. They translate the rights of people affected by conflict or disaster to receive dignified assistance into concrete criteria and actions. Developed by practitioners through evidence and consensus, standards distil global best practices and lessons learned into guidance for programming. By applying these standards in planning, implementation, and evaluation, agencies commit to quality and make themselves accountable to affected populations. This commitment helps ensure that humanitarian efforts meet minimum needs even amid chaotic scenarios such as the onset of a crisis.

Moreover, each of the humanitarian standards uses its guidance and standards as a common language for coordination among a wide range of actors – including NGOs, UN agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, local civil society organisations, and national or local authorities – who may operate under different mandates and funding arrangements. This shared framework enables diverse stakeholders to collaborate effectively in emergency settings, despite variations in institutional roles or relationships with authorities.

By articulating a clear and recognised set of priority actions and benchmarks, the standards promote coherence, accountability, and measurable progress across humanitarian responses. In setting minimum acceptable conditions across critical life-saving sectors – such as water, food, shelter, protection,

and camp management – the standards have become a globally recognised way of working. Adherence to these agreed minimum standards allows humanitarian actors to strive for consistent outcomes, regardless of who delivers the aid or under what circumstances.

Equally important, standards improve effectiveness and accountability in aid delivery. As cited in a report on donor engagement developed by Sphere for Humanitarian Standards Partners last year (Fraser, 2023) both donors and governments have previously highlighted that *'using agreed standards helps improve aid effectiveness and better meet the needs of people affected by crisis'*. Common standards allow performance to be measured transparently, promoting accountability to both donors and disaster- affected communities. Without standards, inconsistent quality of assistance, lack of accountability, gaps and overlaps in response, harm to affected populations, reduced trust and credibility, and inefficient use of resources result.

Over the past two decades, humanitarian standards guidance has expanded across sectors and themes, evolving from a single handbook (Sphere) to a broad ecosystem of thematic topics each with their own benchmarks for measuring progress.

As more sector-specific standards were developed, the Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP) was established in 2015 to provide an umbrella framework for collaboration among these initiatives. The Sphere Secretariat hosts the HSP and oversees the accreditation process for new handbooks seeking official recognition as HSP partners.

Membership in the HSP provides standards focal points and standard users with access to shared resources and platforms, including a joint mobile application, cross-training materials, and guidance on when and how to undertake revisions or updates. While the HSP fosters collaboration and shared visibility, it does not function as a governing body. Until the recent withdrawal of a major donor, most of the handbooks and associated resources maintained independent governance and management structure.

The governance and operational models adopted by each handbook vary significantly, reflecting the specific needs and structure of their respective constituencies. For example:

1. Study was completed in 2023, consultant carried out a desk review on an agreed list of institutional and UN donors. It aimed to improve understanding of the place of standards in donors' funding processes and due diligence to help Sphere and HSP sharpen their own communication and advocacy message. Donors covered were: AECID (Spain), BHA and PRM, Canada, DANIDA, ECHO, FCDO, Germany, Irish Aid, Netherlands, MFA, Norwegian MFA, Swedish SIDA, Switzerland and non-traditional donors included Turkey and the Arab States.

- Some handbooks are supported by boards with fiduciary responsibility (e.g., Sphere, LEGS),
- Others are embedded within broader sectoral networks (e.g., CPMS within the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action),
- Some rely on cluster-based mechanisms (e.g., MSCM),
- While others are affiliated with academic institutions (e.g., SEADS).

This diversity highlights the flexible and context-driven approaches in the administration of humanitarian standards while benefiting from a shared platform for visibility and coordination under the HSP.

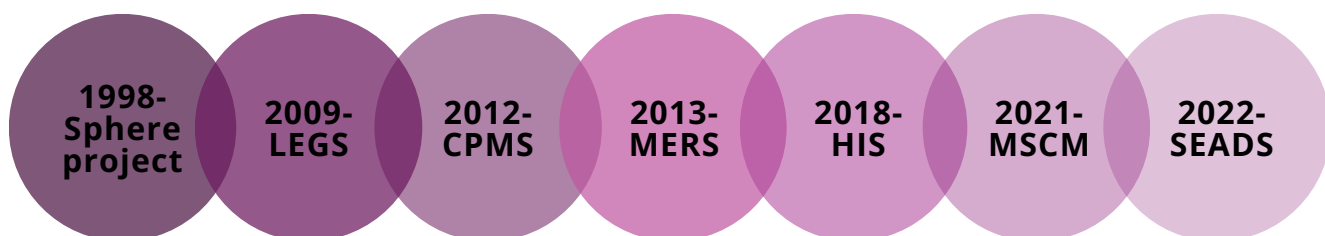


Diagram 1: Launch years of humanitarian standards interviewed

Administration of Humanitarian Guidance

Of the seven humanitarian standards interviewed, governance now ranges from fully institutionalised organisations to informal volunteer-run efforts. This evolution has been organic rather than centrally planned with each set of Minimum Standards following a different trajectory and governance model. The results are a patchwork of management structures.

Broadly, governance and management of standards includes but is not limited to:

- Drafting, piloting, and testing of the standards. This process is often a multi-year effort (see detailed guidance on standard development written by HSP partners in 2022) (HSP, 2022)
- Coordination of the standards at a global level including its representation in coordination forums
- Translation of the standards
- Upkeep of the standards including revision processes that keep the standard relevant and timely
- Aiding organisations, country clusters, governments or UN agencies in the take up of the standards through direct support or advocacy.
- Training on standards, including curriculum development, roll out, mentoring of trainers and oversight of inclusion of standards training in wider training packages.
- Managing the standards relationship with the Humanitarian Standards Partnership including participating in joint efforts such as consultation on new standards, joint advocacy or joint projects.

These events take place concurrently and each have their own timelines and implementation processes. During the interviews, key informants shared that many handbooks began as time-bound projects under larger agencies or networks, then matured into more permanent entities. For example, Sphere started as a multi-agency project hosted by the IFRC and supported by donor grants; as it grew, it “became an independent association registered in Switzerland” with its own legal identity and statutes. Sphere is now governed by a Board of Governors elected by about 60 member organisations (and some individual members) and managed by a dedicated secretariat led by an Executive Director.

In contrast, the Minimum Economic Recovery Standards(MERS) were initially developed under the SEEP Network (an NGO network); when that host organisation ceased, MERS lost its institutional home. It is currently in

'abeyance' – effectively a handbook online and an online discussion forum – with no formal governance structure as Sphere Association is hosting it with a light touch it until a new financial partner is willing and able to support Sphere promote and review the guidance.

Crucially, the level of sustainability and support varies. Established entities like Sphere and CPMS benefit from formal structures and donor recognition, whereas newer or smaller standards like HIS or SEADS face precarious survival once initial project funds dry up.

One thing that unites all the handbooks, is once the initiative gets off the ground sustaining the standards through dedicated funding has proven challenging. Many of the HSP partners interviewed noted that shifts in donor priorities and global crises tightened their funding, putting even well-known standards at risk. In response, there was ongoing discussion about how to improve the management of humanitarian standards across the board so that all can be kept up-to-date and widely used even prior to the current humanitarian reset discussions triggered this introspection.

Main findings

The main findings from the study can be grouped into two areas with recommendations within each area:

- Humanitarian Standards management
 - Documentation and governance framework
 - The role of leaders and managers
- Funding for Humanitarian Standards

Humanitarian Standards Management

All those interviewed reported broadly the same framework under which they operate. At the centre of the leadership and management of the standards sits generally a handful of dedicated people, tasked with leading and managing the standard guidance. Supporting these are governance/steering/strategic advisory groups. Further to this is the user group of the standards, the community of practice that implement the standards within their organisation or cluster. This is a broad simplification, but these structures are seen in all standards.

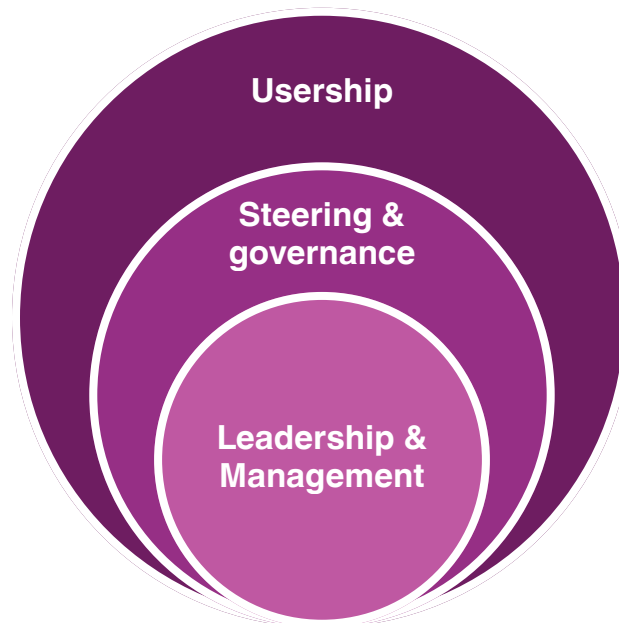


Diagram 2: Simplified governance model for standards

Documentation and Governance Frameworks

Among all those interviewed, a key area identified is the need for more clearly published governance documentation for standard secretariats. Notably, not all initiatives currently operate with formal constitutions, Terms of Reference (ToR), or strategic frameworks that outline how they are managed on a day-to-day basis or how updates to the standards are undertaken.

While two of the more established handbooks reported having comprehensive governance guidance, backed by legal registration under British or Swiss legislation, this is not yet the norm across the partnership. Their experiences underscore a valuable lesson for the broader HSP community to find a balance between collective use and having clear and transparent governance structures. Doing so will contribute to greater stability, credibility, and sustainability. This finding reinforces the need for all standards initiatives to prioritise the development and publication of foundational governance documents as part of their institutional strengthening efforts.

For example, the Camp Management standards working group – while it has a TOR as a cluster working group – lacks a distinct governance document for the standard guidance itself, as it remains part of the wider CCCM cluster. Without clear governance documents, roles and decision-making processes can be confusing, especially when a standard transitions from the early inception, development and drafting phase into the longer-term care and maintenance. It also makes it hard for external stakeholders (e.g. donors or new partners) to understand who is accountable.

Each humanitarian standard initiative should have an established and published governance document or charter. This should outline: the purpose and scope of the standard, the roles of any governing body or host agency, how decisions (updates, endorsements) are made, and how stakeholders (NGOs, clusters, etc.) can participate.

For network-based standards, the document would clarify relationships (e.g. CPMS has very clear guidance on how the CPMS Working Group fits under the Alliance’s steering committee). For independent entities, it can be articles of association or bylaws (Sphere already has statutes as a Swiss Association; LEGS follows UK Charity Commission requirements). For project-housed standards, a TOR can at least define a steering committee’s authority and an agreed contingency plan if the project ends. Importantly, such documentation should include a “business continuity” clause – i.e. what happens if core funding runs out or the host agency can no longer support the standard. Many governance documents historically did not consider a loss of funding, but experience shows that an exit or transition strategy is crucial. Going forward, standards governance charters should specify fallback options (such as transferring custody to a designated organisation like HSP/Sphere or a cluster lead) to avoid standards either languishing or never launching a clear and independent governance structure as is the case for several of those interviewed.

Documenting governance improves transparency and confidence for each governing body. It has allowed donors and users to know there is a structure ensuring quality control and updates. For example, Sphere publishes a five-year strategic plan and annual reports and workplans.

Sharing these documents among the HSP community could serve as templates for emerging standards or those looking to strengthen their governance. In summary, robust documentation professionalises a standard's management and makes its sustainability a shared responsibility, rather than an ad hoc affair.

The role of leaders and managers

From the interviews effective leadership is cited as one of the most decisive factors in a standard's ability to be maintained and to grow in usage. All standards interviewed had leadership that showed passion and care when discussing their work. This role though is precarious.

Here "leadership" includes both the governance bodies (boards, steering committees, etc.) and the management team or focal points who run the standard day-to-day. Strengthening, supporting and building support systems for how these leaders operate could greatly improve standards management.

A recurring lesson is the importance of clear roles, good communication, and trust between governance and management. Sphere's director reflected that governance works well when "you're on the same page, have built up trust, [and] have good communication...". Leaders must understand their distinct roles, in that governance provides strategic direction, accountability, and support management executes and innovates within that framework. This must be crystal clear.

Active engagement of governance members is crucial for all organisations. Governance members need to be more than just figureheads but be willing to roll up their sleeves, supporting the often one-to-two-person leadership. Recruiting board members with specific skills and connections (finance, legal, or donor relations) can multiply the secretariat's capacity. Where possible, standards initiatives should choose governance structures that maximise direct tangible support to the work of the standard: for example, one of the standards interviewed noted the strong role of one board member with close links to donors who could facilitate in creating fundraising opportunities. Another noted the decade's worth of technical experience within their governance structure from both academic, operational and strategic backgrounds. The need for senior positions to be on the boards to leverage usage of the standard within that individual's organisation was noted. 'Skills-screening', i.e. actively searching for and asking clearly for individuals with a diverse skill set, through potentially a screen process is strongly encouraged for those establishing governance.

On the management side, many standards rely on one or two passionate individuals ("focal points") who drive everything. This is efficient and lean, and the passion and drive of the individuals is clear in all interviews.

What is of utmost importance is to support this leadership. To improve resilience, leadership could institutionalise knowledge and distribute tasks. For example, creating a small secretariat team (even if part-time) spreads responsibilities like fundraising, training, and administration. If funding is tight, exploring secondments or part-time loans of staff from partner agencies can bolster the team. For example, prior to the ‘humanitarian reset’ the CPMS Working Group benefited from co-leads from two different agencies and a host of task force leads across organisations, which embeds broader ownership. In smaller initiatives, even forming an informal “management committee” of a few active volunteers can replicate this. Clearly, funding the roles of the focal points is crucial and funding is discussed below.

The Humanitarian Standards Partnership does facilitate a community of practice for standard coordinators to support each other, share workload in joint activities, and avoid isolation and this must be built upon.

In summary, good standards leadership means clearly defined governance arrangements, the right people in governance roles (active and connected), supportive relationships between boards and managers, and deliberate effort to support the management base through a variety of initiatives. When these elements align, standards initiatives can better weather challenges. Leadership through focal points is lean and small, generally one to two individuals that take on diverse tasks in supporting their standard. Governance boards need to clearly support these efforts, and the focal points need to both contribute to and contribute from efforts by the HSP.

Key priorities of leadership

Ideally, what core activities should standards leadership concentrate on? From the interviews key areas where highlighted in which prioritise areas could or should sustain the standard’s relevance and use in the humanitarian sector:

Advocacy and integration: A primary task is mainstreaming the Minimum Standards into humanitarian practice – getting buy-in and ownership from operational agencies, clusters, and donors so that the standards are routinely used. This requires advocacy at high levels and therefore the need for global leadership. Leaders should engage major NGOs, UN agencies, and government donors to promote adoption of the standards in their policies, guidelines, and field programs and it is recognised how intensive this process can be in time and resources. Such integration creates a virtuous cycle: if proposals and programs must follow standards, agencies invest in training staff on them, which increases demand for updates and support from the standards-setting body.

Leadership should concentrate on these strategic outreach efforts—attending cluster meetings, presenting at humanitarian conferences, joining inter-agency initiatives – to embed their standards as “the way we do business” in emergencies. This also means demonstrating how the standards align with and support broader frameworks.

Capacity building and user support: Even the best handbook will go unused if practitioners cannot apply it. Humanitarian standards leaders should focus on enabling uptake through training programs, help desks, communities of practice, and translation of materials. Leadership must devote energy to build a cadre of trainers and champions who carry the standard forward in the field. CPMS invested heavily in global and regional training, and as a result national NGOs began “carrying [the standards] around... telling how it changed the way they work,” showing deep ownership at local level. Leaders should prioritise such capacity-building initiatives and seek funding for them (since they are often attractive to donors as direct aid effectiveness measures). Additionally, providing online support tools – e.g. HSP’s interactive handbook platform, or moderated forums is important to assist practitioners in real time. A leader’s role is to identify user needs and ensure the standard’s guidance is accessible (in multiple languages and formats) and user-friendly. Minimum Standards for Camp Management noted the high number of languages the standard was available in, some produced in very short time periods to meet emergency needs with these efforts coordinated by global leadership or grass roots efforts fed up to the leadership.

Monitoring, learning and revision: To stay relevant, standards need periodic review and updating based on field experience and new evidence. However, revising a handbook is a major undertaking and again requires global leadership. Leaders should not let the content go stale – they should monitor how standards are applied and what gaps or innovations emerge. Establishing simple monitoring and evaluation (M&E) – e.g. collecting feedback from usage of the standard per organisation or doing after-action reviews on responses – can provide data to advocate for updates. When funding permits, leaders must drive the update process (as Sphere, LEGS and CPMS have done on 5–10 year cycles). In between major revisions, minor updates or supplemental guidance (e.g. Sphere’s COVID-19 guidance annex) can keep standards fully relevant and appropriate within changing contexts. Leadership should also research and document the impact of using the standards (for example, any improvements in program outcomes or coordination), to reinforce their importance to donors and responders.

Collaboration and cross-fertilisation: The humanitarian standards are interlinked. Leaders should coordinate with other standards bodies through both HSP and bilateral partnerships to ensure coherence. This could include aligning definitions and indicators (HSP promotes a “common foundation” like the Humanitarian Charter and Protection Principles across all standards). It also means joint products – for instance, developing guidance on how to apply multiple standards together in a response. By working together, standards leaders present a unified approach to quality and can jointly advocate for support. Leaders should embrace such innovation and collaboration, focusing on the big picture of an integrated standards system rather than siloed efforts.

In essence, if documentation and basic management processes are in place, leaders can concentrate on strategy, outreach and improvement. A well-led standards initiative will act as a guardian of quality in its sector, constantly asking: Are humanitarian actors using the standards guidance? Is it making a difference? How do we support them better? These questions should guide where resources are spent. It is clear from even the four highlighted areas of focus that the role of global leadership is both vital in keeping the standard alive and relevant, it is also clear that these roles are far beyond voluntary, part-time efforts but require funded roles.

Funding for Humanitarian Standards

Perhaps the most critical challenge underpinning all others is funding. Almost every interviewee acknowledged difficulties in securing sustainable financing for maintaining humanitarian standards and the recent stop-work orders from US donors impacted heavily. Many interviews needed to give ‘pre’ and ‘post’ answers to questions on funding as such dramatic changes had revised many projects and plans. Unlike humanitarian operations, which donors fund as direct aid to crises, standards are a global public good – essential for effectiveness but often falling between the cracks of funding mandates. Improving funding and creating predictable, joined up funding for humanitarian standards will likely require a combination of strategies:

Making donors part of the solution: Traditional donor agencies (government aid departments, UN humanitarian funds) should be convinced to systematically support standards as a cost-effective way to improve overall response quality. This was recognised at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, where donors like Switzerland and Denmark emphasised the need for standards and qualities in response. If major donors explicitly require or encourage adherence to recognised standards in proposals, they must also commit funds to the organisations that develop and promote those standards.

A key recommendation is the pursuit of multi-year grants or partnership agreements to support standards bodies. The stop-start one-year project funding is antithetical to the long-term nature of maintaining standards, such longer commitments allow hiring stable staff and executing multi-year plans (e.g. training programs, updates). Donors could pool resources to fund the HSP network collectively, ensuring no single standards partner is left behind. For example, a group of like-minded donors (governments or foundations) might establish a “Humanitarian Standards Fund” that provides annual support to each validated standards initiative, tied to performance milestones. This would recognise standards maintenance as an ongoing humanitarian enabling function, much like coordination or logistics.

Diversity in funding: Relying on one donor or one type of donor is risky. Many standards have historically depended on a dominant funder. When those donors change priorities or budgets the standard can face a financial cliff. To improve resilience, standards bodies should tap multiple sources: bilateral donors from different governments, UN agencies (UNICEF, UNHCR, etc. who benefit from standards), and private foundations or trusts. In-kind contributions should not be overlooked: many agencies contribute staff time, office space, or translation/printing services to standards. Formalising such contributions through secondment programs or “adopt a standard” initiatives (where an agency takes on funding a specific aspect like translations or website hosting) could help.

Embedding costs: A further strategy is to mainstream the costs of standards implementation into humanitarian programming budgets. For example, if a large NGO receives funding for a WASH program and will apply Sphere standards, that proposal could include a line item for “Sphere handbook training for staff”. Similarly, cluster lead agencies using the Camp Management standards could allocate a portion of their global cluster support funds to maintain those standards. Over time, if standards are seen as integral to doing humanitarian work, funding their maintenance could be built into the cost of response. This might involve advocacy to include standards in appeals. It essentially treats standards as public infrastructure for humanitarian response – just as we fund coordination mechanisms, we fund standard-setting as part of the system.

Cooperative funding via HSP: The HSP network itself could be leveraged for collective fundraising. Instead of each standards partner separately approaching donors, HSP (under Sphere’s leadership) could present more joint funding proposal that

covers multiple standards as a package – emphasising how supporting the suite of standards maximises humanitarian effectiveness across sectors. This might appeal to donors interested in system-wide improvements. It would also allow more efficient use of funds (shared infrastructure like the HSP app, joint translation of overlapping content, etc.). If one standard's needs are less in a given year, funds could be shifted to another under a common grant. Such a pooled approach might prevent scenarios where one standard struggles while another has excess funds.

In practical terms, improving funding will likely require leadership time dedicated to fundraising strategy. This includes cultivating donor relationships, pursuing new donors, and constantly demonstrating the impact of standards to justify funding. To avoid boom-and-bust, a more programmatic funding approach is needed – treating handbook revisions, and upgrades as an ongoing program that donors fund incrementally each year. This will be made possible through the transition to primarily digital.

Conclusion and recommendations

Humanitarian standards have become indispensable for effective humanitarian action – they embody our collective commitment that crisis-affected people receive assistance that meets basic quality to respect and uphold people’s dignity. As the family of standards has expanded and matured, strong governance, proactive management, and sustainable funding are needed to keep these standards timely and widely applied. This briefing has highlighted both the diversity of current approaches and the common challenges they face. To summarise, the following practical recommendations are put forward for humanitarian policymakers, donors, and the standards initiatives themselves:

Recommendations

Establish clear governance for all standards: Every humanitarian standard initiative should document its governance structure (roles, decision-making, update process) and make this available. Harmonise basic definitions across standards and include contingency plans for loss of funding or host support. Ensure at the heart of the governance structure is a well-supported and funded global leadership. Invest in building active, well-informed boards or steering committees that work in partnership with management. Where appropriate, recruit governance members with fundraising influence or technical expertise to support the standard.

Support global leadership: Fundraise to ensure longevity in global leadership positions, moving away from project focus into core funding. Reduce sole reliance on one focal point by creating small secretariats or co-lead arrangements (even if part-time or virtual). Share responsibilities among multiple agencies when possible (as in the CPMS model) to increase ownership. Use the HSP network to facilitate peer support, joint training, and resource-sharing among standard managers. HSP is the correct instrument to lead on the support to global leadership. This could come through the role of a jointly funded HSP Partnership Coordinator leading on joint initiatives, fundraising, surge support and capacity building.

Focus on roll-out and user support: Prioritise activities that get standards off the page and into practice – training of trainers, field workshops, help desks, and translations. Seek earmarked funding for these activities in tandem with any new standard development. Monitor usage and gather feedback from field users to continually improve relevance.

A particular focus area would be the HSP online platform. To ensure the platform remains accessible and practical, invest in upgrading the HSP platform into a dynamic, multilingual, mobile-optimised platform. The new platform should offer cross-standard navigation, practical tools, links to training, help desks, and feedback channels reflecting the wealth of resources and content available that has been produced by Sphere and HSP partners. The HSP platform should be the 'shop window' onto the standards. Ensuring usability in low-connectivity settings is crucial to ensure access by all.

Pursue more joint approaches: Present a united front to institutionalise standards in humanitarian operations. Through forums like the IASC, Global Clusters, and donor consortia, advocate for policies that require or encourage adherence to the recognised standards across sectors. Emphasise that supporting standards is a cost-effective way to improve aid quality system wide. Through a joint advocacy strategy developed by HSP and partners, standards can target key policy spaces, produce joint statements and policy briefs and produce aligned timely advocacy products.

Innovate funding: Engage donors in multi-year commitments to standards as a core part of humanitarian infrastructure through a Humanitarian Standards Investment Plan. Create a light, pooled funding mechanism or trust fund for the Humanitarian Standards Partnership to ensure even the smaller standards have baseline support and participate in joint approaches and initiatives. Encourage major NGOs and UN agencies to contribute (financially or in-kind) to the standards from which they benefit, making it a shared responsibility.

Explore strengthening the HSP beyond a partnership: The Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP), now in its tenth year, is evolving rapidly in the midst of the current "humanitarian reset". Among partners there is willingness and opportunity for deeper collaboration, including shared governance. A review of models for shared governance and closer operational integration within the HSP and beyond would be timely.

By implementing these recommendations, the humanitarian community can safeguard and strengthen the ecosystem of humanitarian standards. The goal is a future where every humanitarian responder has access to well-maintained, up-to-date guidance, and every donor and agency actively supports the standards that underpin quality aid. In practical terms, this means moving from an ad hoc, under-funded approach to one that is institutionalised and adequately resource.

Appendix 1: Short history of each standard interviewed

SPHERE

Sphere is about upholding the dignity and rights of crisis-affected people through principled, accountable and quality humanitarian action.

Sphere was started in 1997 by impassioned aid workers who wanted to improve the level and approach of emergency response. With this goal in mind, they framed the Humanitarian Charter and identified a set of Minimum Standards to be applied contextually in all humanitarian crises.

Initially developed by non-governmental organisations and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Sphere resources are primary reference tools for national and international NGOs, UN agencies, governments, donors, the private sector, volunteers, and many others. Today, Sphere is a global network bringing together and empowering practitioners to improve and sustain the quality and accountability of humanitarian assistance. Sphere hosts the Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP), the Minimum Economic Recovery Standards (MERS) and is joint copyright holder of the Core Humanitarian Standard.

Sphere's flagship publication, the Sphere Handbook, is one of the most widely known and internationally recognised set of humanitarian principles and minimum standards.

The Minimum Economic Recovery Standards (MERS)

MERS was developed to guide humanitarian and development actors in supporting market-based recovery and livelihoods in crisis-affected settings. Launched around 2010 under the SEEP Network, MERS provides minimum standards and best practices for economic interventions such as cash transfers, small business support, and market system development.

MERS was widely used to improve the quality and consistency of post-crisis economic recovery efforts. However, after the SEEP Network ceased operations, MERS lost its formal institutional home and currently exists in an informal state. The Sphere Association hosts the MERS materials but without formal integration or dedicated funding. A community discussion forum called Markets in Crisis (MiC) continues to support peer learning on MERS, but the standards are effectively in need of support to Sphere.

Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS)

Launched 2009 after a Tufts University-led project (2006–09) in response to the need for livestock-focused standards. LEGS transitioned from a project overseen by a steering group to an independent UK-registered charity in 2018. It is governed by a Board of Trustees (5 trustees currently) and advised by a Technical Advisory Group of experts. The LEGS “secretariat” is extremely lean – essentially one coordinator and two part-time technical/admin consultants. This formal NGO model gives LEGS a legal identity and bank account, but also means it must sustain itself as an organisation.

Child Protection Minimum Standards (CPMS)

First edition published in 2012, now on 2nd edition in 2019. Initially developed under the global Child Protection Working Group (within the Protection Cluster), it later became part of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (established 2016). The Alliance functions as a network with a defined governance structure: a steering committee (acting like a board) oversees a Secretariat (with a Director) that manages multiple technical working groups, one of which is the CPMS Working Group. The CPMS Working Group has its own Terms of Reference and with co-leadership from Save the Children and IRC. Organisational membership is key – the Alliance is composed of agencies rather than individuals, ensuring institutional buy-in beyond any single person. This networked governance spreads ownership across the child protection sector.

Humanitarian Inclusion Standards (HIS) for older people and people with disabilities

Launched 2018 as a product of a time-bound project (Age and Disability Capacity Programme). After the project ended, HIS had no formal host or funding: “no more funding... to improve governance or use of the standards... it’s remained an open-source document”. Two focal points with HelpAge and CBM Global have continued to promote the HIS on the HSP Platform. Both organisations are committed to support this platform. The HIS has been used in multiple trainings to support implementation of humanitarian projects at country level and embedded in many HelpAge partnership activities. Focal points have voluntarily maintained the standard, and HIS was accepted as a member of the HSP network in 2018 – but without any secretariat or governance body of its own.

In practice, HIS exists as a set of standards when working in targeted age and disability focused projects available in multiple languages (thanks to ad hoc translations by various NGOs) but with no institutional framework or update mechanism. A short consultancy is currently in process of research to identify the relevance of the standard in the present humanitarian climate and other developments in guidance on age and disability in the sector. This illustrates the most informal end of the spectrum.

Minimum Standards for Camp Management (MSCM)

Launched 2021, after many years of discussion in the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) cluster. It remains cluster-hosted: essentially a working group under the global CCCM Cluster co-led by IOM and an NGO (DRC). There is no independent entity or secretariat; governance is via the cluster's Strategic Advisory Group and a Working Group Terms of Reference. IOM currently pays the annual membership fee to include Camp Management standards in the HSP network (since the cluster itself is not a legal entity). Day-to-day, two individuals manage the standard alongside their regular jobs. This embedded model leverages an existing coordination mechanism, but the standard's sustainability depends on cluster support and goodwill rather than a dedicated structure.

Standards for Supporting Crop-Related Livelihoods in Emergencies (SEADS)

Published 2022 as a new standard for agricultural livelihood support. SEADS was created through a BHA-funded project led by Tufts University with NGO partners (CRS and LEGS). Currently, SEADS is a project without an organisation: Tufts hosts the website and grant, but SEADS has "no organisational identity" of its own. A steering group of experts guided the content development, and LEGS provided mentorship (since SEADS drew on the LEGS methodology and even improved on it with new digital formats). Now that the initial grant ended with the handbook launch, SEADS has entered a hiatus – it has tools and a community of practice, but no confirmed funding or host to carry out widespread roll-out. The critical next step of institutionalising and maintaining SEADS is on hold, illustrating the challenge of turning a donor-funded project into a sustained initiative.

Appendix 2: Comparative table

Standard	Launch year	Governance & hosting	Operational model	Funding sources
Sphere	1998/ 2000	Independent Swiss association; Board of 12–15 elected governors (agency & individual members).	Sphere Secretariat with full-time staff	Donor grants (e.g. government aid agencies); membership dues (organisations & individuals); publication sales.
LEGS	2009	UK Charitable Incorporated Organisation; Board of Trustees (5 members); Technical Advisory Group of experts.	Secretariat of 3 part-time consultants (Coordinator, Technical, Admin)	Major grants from USAID/BHA (annual or 1–2-year awards); project-specific funds from other donors; small reserves.
CPMS	2012	Part of Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action; Alliance has a Steering Committee (multi-agency) and Director. CPMS governed via a Working Group with co- leads and its own TOR.	Alliance Secretariat (hosted by Plan International supports CPMS WG. Large network of member agencies provides in-kind staff support.	Pooled donor funding: long-term core support from Sida (via Save the Children Sweden); US Government grants (BHA, BPRM); other governments (e.g. Canada) and UN agencies; significant in-kind contributions (staff time, printing, events).

HIS	2018	No formal governance post-project. Initially developed by HelpAge & CBM; accepted into HSP network. Maintained informally by a focal point at CBM.	No dedicated secretariat or staff. Ad hoc promotion through partners' own networks.	Initial donor (DFID) funded development. No ongoing funding, relies on voluntary efforts and integration into others' programs.
MSCM	2021	CCCM Cluster Working Group co-led by IOM and NGO. Guided by Cluster Strategic Advisory Group	Embedded in cluster coordination. IOM acts as administrative host (paying HSP fees); cluster coordinators and WG members manage tasks.	Minimal direct funding. IOM provides some core funding through staff time and hosting fees; otherwise, dependent on ad hoc contributions and any project funds secured for updates or events.
SEADS	2022	Project steering group (20+ experts) under Tufts University (grant holder). Not an independent organisation.	Temporary project team (Project Manager, researchers, consultants) during development.	Initial 3-year grant from USAID/BHA. No follow-on funding secured yet;

			<p>Partner NGOs (CRS, LEGS) implemented activities.</p> <p>Post- launch: no active secretariat (project in hiatus).</p>	<p>project seeking new grants or host institution to continue rollout.</p>
MERS	2010	<p>Originally hosted by SEEP Network (as project with a steering committee). Host withdrew 2018; Sphere now custodian.</p>	<p>No current dedicated staff or governance. A community forum (“Markets in Crisis”) run by volunteers keeps some engagement.</p>	<p>Past funding from donors (USAID, etc.) via SEEP. Currently unfunded – Sphere must fundraise to reactivate MERS or include it in proposals.</p>

Appendix 3: Interview questionnaire

Preamble
Name of standard
Name of focal point for the handbook
Email contact for standard focal point
Year of launch for handbook
Documentation
Does the handbook have a published terms of reference or similar document that describes its governance?
Does the standard maintain and publish a work plan?
Governance
Describe the form of governance or management of the handbook standard
Describe the formation of the governance system
Is the governance structure made up of organisations or individuals?
Are elections held, how were members of the governance structure elected?
Who 'houses' the governance? A cluster/Humanitarian Standards Partnership/an alliance?
Describe some of the challenges governance brought?

Describe some of the positive impacts that governance has brought?

Who is accountable for the action of the standard?

Funding

Describe the funding for the work of the standards

For how long has funding for the standards been available?

What activities does the funding cover? Are there activities that occur that go unfunded?

Describe the form of governance or management of the handbook standard

References

Fraser, E. (2023). How do Institutional Donors and UN Agencies Reference Humanitarian Standards?

HSP. (2022). Guidance on Standards Development and Revision.