



# Editorial: Time to take professionalism seriously in the pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 6

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As one who has worked in the development of water and sanitation for nearly 45 years, I look over the wall sometimes into the world of humanitarian work, and see a very different environment from the one in which I have mainly worked. The particular contrast which I want to highlight is the wide international consensus around clearly articulated principles and standards in humanitarian work, and what I see as a far looser commitment to true professionalism in long-term development work, including in the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector.

I realize that what I am about to say may be contentious, and others may see things differently. I therefore invite your response, whether you agree or disagree.

In humanitarian work the planning, management, and implementation of responses to crises are underpinned by ethical, legal, and practical principles, commitments, and processes. Responses in key sectors, including WASH, are guided by clearly articulated standards. The 2018 edition of the *Sphere Handbook* (Sphere Association, 2018) sets out the results of the most recent consultative update of the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards. The document is now in its fourth edition, the first having been published nearly 20 years ago. The *Sphere Handbook* sets out a consensus to which all who work in humanitarian response aspire. Naturally the challenging contexts in which Sphere is applied mean that its standards are not always achieved; nevertheless the very existence of these and related standards speaks volumes about the ambition for professionalism within humanitarian response.

In these few lines I am calling for a standard of professionalism among all those who implement long-term WASH development programmes which at least matches what is evident in humanitarian response. This comes from a conviction that we as a profession could do things much better, and from an awareness of how easy it is for well-meaning but unprofessional individuals and organizations to perpetuate poor practice. In pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) there is much talk about business-as-usual being inadequate. Raising standards of development professionalism is, in my view, one important aspect of changing the way we work – for the better.

So, what would a professionalized WASH development sector look like? I propose a simple system built on three components. First, each country needs to have its own policies, guidelines, standards, and approaches in aspects ranging from design and construction standards to implementation and management models. Many countries already have such documentation, although in some countries these are insufficiently disseminated to and known by local governments and others, including those outside the WASH sector, who need to enforce them.

Second, foreign organizations which engage in development work should not only be registered with government – this of course being a necessity to operate in that country – but I believe they should also be professionally recognized and licensed by government. Licensing should only follow some form of assessment of the competence and experience of the organization in question. Some countries already undertake such licensing and pre-qualification, but usually only in certain aspects of WASH programming such as well drilling. I would argue that such procedures should be extended to a far broader range of organizations. A key question in assessing the competence of organizations is whether they have exposed themselves to independent and transparent evaluation processes from time to time, and what the findings of those evaluations have been.

Third, the professional standing of individual development workers should be recognized, through a variety of routes depending on their type of employment. Academics and researchers already have such paths to recognition through well-established peer review processes. Engineers have routes to professional standing through professional registration and professional development. But many other development practitioners have no such recognition, no proof of competence, despite the existence of formal and informal mechanisms. It seems to be too easy for individuals, from the country in question or from abroad, to establish themselves as development workers, while having little or no competence, understanding of the contexts in which they are working, or long-term commitment to the results of their action.

Why do I call for such a threefold process of professionalization? Because as development workers in the WASH sector, our ultimate accountability should be to those we serve. And because the public has a right to require that the organizations and individuals serving them are undertaking their work according to good practices. After all, when you visit your doctor, dentist or accountant, or when you entrust your child to the care of a school, should you not expect professional individuals to deal with you or your child to high standards and in ways approved by your national authorities?

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## Reference

Sphere Association (2018) *The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response* [pdf], 4th edition, Geneva: Sphere Association <<https://doi.org/10.3362/9781908176707>> <<https://spherestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/Sphere-Handbook-2018-EN.pdf>> [accessed 4 March 2019].