

Disaster Response: The Sphere Project

Introduction

The Sphere Project is an initiative to determine and promote standards by which the global community responds to the plight of people affected by disasters.

This note describes the format and content of the handbook produced by the project.



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Humanitarian aid is material or logistical assistance provided for humanitarian purposes, typically in response to humanitarian crises including natural disaster and man-made disaster.

The primary objective of humanitarian aid is to save lives, alleviate suffering, and maintain human dignity. It may therefore be distinguished from development aid, which seeks to address the underlying socioeconomic factors which may have led to a crisis or emergency.

Background

The 1990s saw a rapid increase in the international activities of humanitarian agencies. This was particularly the case during the Great Lakes refugee crisis in central Africa in 1994 that followed the genocide in Rwanda. A number of donor and NGO evaluations of the response to this crisis were critical, and this led to discussions among humanitarian agencies about the lack of standards

for providing humanitarian assistance. The idea was given added momentum by some of the conclusions from the multi-donor *Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda*, which criticized the performance of humanitarian agencies in the Great Lakes crisis.

In 1997 a group of humanitarian NGOs and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement initiated the Sphere Project to improve the quality of their actions during disaster response and to be held accountable for them.



The aims of Sphere

Sphere (which is a title to reflect its worldwide application, not an acronym) aims to introduce considerations of quality and accountability to humanitarian responses.

Its philosophy is based on two core beliefs:

- those affected by disaster or conflict have a right to life and dignity and, therefore a right to assistance; and
- all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering arising out of disaster or conflict.

Sphere articulates these beliefs through a Humanitarian Charter and Core and Minimum Standards. These are published in a handbook. The latest edition was published in 2011.

Humanitarian Charter

The Charter expresses the shared conviction of humanitarian agencies that

all people affected by disaster or conflict have a right to:

- life and dignity;
- receive humanitarian assistance; and
- protection and security.

It also expresses the belief that the affected population is at the centre of humanitarian action and recognises that their active participation is essential to providing assistance in ways that best meet the needs of all society including vulnerable and socially-excluded people. Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of agency accountability to affected communities. The Minimum Standards are an articulation of what these principles and obligations mean in practice.

Fundamentals of humanitarian action

Humanitarian action consists of two main pillars; protection and assistance.

Much of the handbook is concerned with guidelines for humanitarian assistance but it is recognised that agencies can also contribute to protecting those faced with the threat of violence or coercion.

Protection

Protection is concerned with the safety, dignity and rights of people affected by disaster or armed conflict.

There are four basic principles that inform humanitarian action: avoid causing further harm as a result of your actions; ensure people's access to impartial assistance; protect people from physical and psychological harm due to violence or coercion; and assist with rights claims, access to remedies and recovery from abuse. These principles reflect the more severe threats that people commonly face in times of conflict or disaster. The handbook describes the responsibilities and options for agencies as well as particular protection needs.

Technical Minimum Standards

All the technical standards follow the same format, the Minimum Standards for WASH are presented here as an example.

Introduction

The introduction explains why the subject is important to humanitarian relief, the links to the Humanitarian Charter and international law, links to other sections of the handbook and the key areas that support the rights and capacities of vulnerable people.

Minimum Standards

Technical chapters are sub-divided into their main elements. [Figure 1 available here](#) shows this breakdown for WASH. The first sub-chapter defines the overall objectives for the chapter and sets minimum standards for defining those objectives are met.

The WASH programme has only one overall minimum standard:

WASH programme design and implementation – *WASH needs of the affected population are met and users are involved in the design, management and maintenance of the facilities where appropriate.*

The remaining sub-chapters are related to the functional areas included in the technical section.



Assistance

Sphere defines the quality and scope of humanitarian assistance provided through a series of Core and Minimum Standards.

Core Standards apply to all humanitarian action while Minimum Standards apply to key life-saving sectors:

- water supply, sanitation and hygiene promotion;
- food security and nutrition;
- shelter, settlement and non-food items; and
- health care.

The Core and Minimum Standards describe conditions that must be achieved in any humanitarian response in order for disaster affected populations to survive and recover.

Standards format

All Core and Minimum Standards follow a similar format:

Introduction – sets out the major relevant issues

The standard – a general and universal statement, qualitative in nature, specifies the minimum levels of attainment in humanitarian response. They are applicable in any disaster situation.

Key actions – practical action *suggested* to attain the standard. Not all key actions may be applicable in all contexts.

Key indicators – serve as signals that show whether a standard has been attained. They provide a way of measuring the results of key actions but relate to the minimum standard, not the key action.

Guidance notes – context specific points to consider when aiming at reaching key actions and indicators. They provide advice on practical difficulties, benchmarks, priority setting and cross-

cutting themes. They do not provide guidance on how to implement activities.

Appendices, references and further reading – provides additional information to support implementation and sources of further information.

Core Standards

These are the first set of standards and they inform all the others. Together with the Protection Principles they underpin all humanitarian activity and must be read in conjunction with the Minimum standards in the technical chapters.

There are six Core Standards:

1. **People-centred humanitarian approach** – People's capacity and strategies to survive with dignity are integral to the design and approach to humanitarian response.
2. **Coordination and collaboration**
Humanitarian response is planned and implemented in coordination

with the relevant authorities, humanitarian agencies and civil society organisations engaged in impartial humanitarian action, working together for maximum efficiency, coverage and effectiveness.

3. **Assessment** – The priority needs of the disaster-affected population are identified through a systematic assessment of the context, risks to life with dignity and the capacity of the affected people and relevant authorities to respond.
4. **Design and response** – The humanitarian response meets the assessed needs of the disaster-affected population in relation to context, the risks face and the capacity of the affected people and state to cope and recover.
5. **Performance, transparency and learning** – The performance of humanitarian agencies is continually

examined and communicated to stakeholders; projects are adapted in response to performance.

6. **Aid worker performance**

Humanitarian agencies provide appropriate management, supervision and psychosocial support, enabling aid workers to have the knowledge, skills, behaviour and attitudes to plan and implement an effective humanitarian response with humanity and respect.

When to use Sphere

The Handbook is designed for use in disaster response but may also be useful in disaster preparedness and humanitarian advocacy.

The Handbook is applicable in a range of situations where relief is required, including natural disasters as well as armed conflict. It is designed to be used in both slow- and rapid-onset situations,

in both rural and urban environments, in developing and developed countries, anywhere in the world.

Who uses Sphere?

In practice, most organizations working in humanitarian disasters now use the Sphere Standards as a guideline for their work. Some do not acknowledge that they are doing so but, at field level, the standards and actions and indicators usually provide the foundation for determining the level of service provided.

Where are all the numbers?

For many organizations and field staff the most important elements in Sphere are the numbers.

Minimum water requirements, numbers of users per toilet cubicle, quantities of non food items, size of refuse containers etc. are given in the key actions, indicators or guidance notes.

The important points to note are that they are *minimum levels not maximum levels and they are recommendations not legislation*.

Users must take account of the environment in which they are working when defining standard details.

On many occasions the numbers suggested by Sphere will not be sufficient to meet community needs and expectations. Implementing agencies must always refer back to the Minimum and Core Standards given in Sphere to ensure the services they provide are adequate and appropriate. Merely relying on the numbers provided is not enough.

Who polices Sphere?

Nobody! Sphere is a voluntary code and a self-regulatory tool for quality and accountability; there is no compliance mechanism.

Further information

What else is available?

The Charter is available in English, French, Spanish, German, Russian and Arabic and over 20 other languages. It is accompanied by training materials, examples of Sphere in practice, promotional materials and many other useful documents. See update on pages 7 and 8.



Full details of the background to Sphere, the Humanitarian Charter and supporting materials can be found at:

<http://www.sphereproject.org/>

Sphere Handbook 2011 released in eBook format

The new eBook is available for the most popular e-readers in English, [French](#), Russian and [Spanish](#). An Arabic version will be available later this year (2014).

The Kindle version will work on the Amazon e-reader and is available from most Amazon online stores. It costs GBP 6.39, USD 10.85, Euro 7.99 or its equivalent in other currencies. Prices may vary slightly according to the Amazon shop you choose (see below). The ePub version of the eBook will work on many e-readers currently available on the market, including iOS (Apple), Android and Windows devices. It is available from [Practical Action Publishing](#). Its price is GBP 7.54 (to

obtain this price make sure you use the discount code SPHERE2011 at the check-out).

“We are very happy to offer the content of the Sphere Handbook 2011 edition in this additional format, as our research suggests there is a demand for it among humanitarian workers,” says Aninia Nadig, responsible for the production of the Handbook as well as for Advocacy and Networking Management at the Sphere Project office.

“We expect that the eBook’s attractive price will help achieve further dissemination of the Sphere Handbook,” adds Nadig.

The eBook edition of the Sphere Handbook is a response to the fact that e-readers and tablets are becoming more and more ubiquitous.

About this note

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