

What is Sphere?

Sphere is based on two core beliefs: first, that all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering arising out of calamity and conflict, and second, that those affected by disaster have a right to life with dignity and therefore a right to assistance. Sphere is three things: a handbook, a broad process of collaboration and an expression of commitment to quality and accountability.

The initiative was launched in 1997 by a group of humanitarian NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, who framed a Humanitarian Charter and identified Minimum Standards to be attained in disaster assistance, in each of five key sectors (water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter and health services). This process led to the publication of the first Sphere handbook in 2000. Taken together, the Humanitarian Charter and the Minimum Standards contribute to an operational framework for accountability in disaster assistance efforts.

The cornerstone of the handbook is the Humanitarian Charter, which is based on the principles and provisions of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, refugee law and the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief*. The Charter describes the core principles that govern humanitarian action and reasserts the right of populations affected by disaster, whether natural or man-made (including armed conflict), to protection and assistance. It also reasserts the right of disaster-affected populations to life with dignity.

The Charter points out the legal responsibilities of states and warring parties to guarantee the right to protection and assistance. When the relevant authorities are unable and/or unwilling to fulfil their responsibilities, they are obliged to allow humanitarian organisations to provide humanitarian assistance and protection.

The Minimum Standards and the key indicators have been developed using broad networks of practitioners in each of the sectors. Most of the standards, and the indicators that accompany them, are not new, but consolidate and adapt existing knowledge and practice. Taken as a whole, they represent a remarkable consensus across a broad spectrum, and reflect a continuing determination to ensure that human rights and humanitarian principles are realised in practice.

To date, over 400 organisations in 80 countries, all around the world, have contributed to the development of the Minimum Standards and key indicators. This new (2004) edition of the handbook has been significantly revised, taking into account recent technical developments and feedback from agencies using Sphere in the field. In particular, a sixth sector, food security, has been added and integrated with those of nutrition and food aid. Another new chapter details a number of process standards common to all sectors. These include participation, assessment, response, targeting, monitoring, evaluation, and staff competencies and management. In addition, seven cross-cutting issues (children, older people, disabled people, gender, protection, HIV/AIDS and the environment) with relevance to all sectors have been taken into account.

When to use this book

The Sphere handbook is designed for use in disaster response, and may also be useful in disaster preparedness and humanitarian advocacy. It 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. The emphasis throughout is on meeting the urgent survival needs of people affected by disaster, while asserting their basic human right to life with dignity.

Despite this focus, the information contained in the handbook is not prescriptive. It can be applied flexibly to other situations, such as disaster preparedness and the transition out of disaster relief. It is not designed for use in response to technological disasters, such as those involving transport, industrial, chemical, biological or nuclear

calamity. However, while not addressing these types of disaster specifically, it is relevant to situations where population movements or other consequences triggered by such an event create a need for humanitarian assistance.

Timeframe

The timeframe in which the handbook is used depends largely on the context. It may take days, weeks or even months before agencies are able to achieve the Minimum Standards and indicators specified in a particular sector. In some situations, the Minimum Standards may be achieved without the need for external intervention. A timeframe for implementation needs to be agreed in any given situation. Where relevant, guidance notes suggest realistic timescales for the implementation of the standards and indicators.

There are different approaches among humanitarian agencies as to how to carry out relief activities, based on differences in identities, mandates and capabilities. These differences point to the concept of complementarity, which means that humanitarian agencies use different modes of action or techniques in fulfilling their responsibility to provide assistance. In all contexts, disaster response should support and/or complement existing government services in terms of structure, design and long-term sustainability.

How to use this book

There are already many field manuals that offer practical guidance to humanitarian workers. This book is not a ‘how to’ manual. Instead, it offers a set of Minimum Standards and key indicators that inform different aspects of humanitarian action, from initial assessment through to coordination and advocacy. The standards are general statements that define the minimum level to be attained in a given context; the indicators act as ‘signals’ that determine whether or not a standard has been attained; while the guidance notes provide additional information.

Each of the four technical chapters – water supply, sanitation and hygiene promotion; food security, nutrition and food aid; shelter,

settlement and non-food items; and health services – has its own set of standards and indicators. The initial chapter on common standards sets out guidelines for programme design and implementation, which are applicable to all sectors. This chapter should be read first, before turning to the relevant technical chapter.

The guidance notes in each chapter relate to specific points that should be considered when applying the standards in different situations. They offer advice on priority issues and on tackling practical difficulties, and may also describe dilemmas, controversies or gaps in current knowledge. Guidance notes always relate to a specific key indicator, and the link is signalled in the text. Key indicators should always be read in conjunction with the relevant guidance note.

Each chapter also contains a brief introduction setting out the major issues relevant to that sector and appendices containing select lists of references detailing further sources of technical information, assessment checklists and, where relevant, formulas, tables and examples of report forms. It is important to remember that all the chapters are interconnected, and that frequently standards described in one sector need to be addressed in conjunction with standards described in others.

The difference between standards and indicators

The standards are based on the principle that populations affected by disaster have the right to life with dignity. They are qualitative in nature, and are meant to be universal and applicable in any operating environment. The key indicators, as measures to the standards, can be qualitative or quantitative in nature. They function as tools to measure the impact of processes used and programmes implemented. Without them, the standards would be little more than statements of good intent, difficult to put into practice.

The standards for the different sectors do not stand alone: they are interdependent. However, there is inevitably a tension between the formulation of universal standards and the ability to apply them in practice. Every context is different. In some instances, local factors may make the realisation of all standards and indicators unattainable. When this is the case, the gap between the standards and indicators

listed in the handbook and the ones reached in actual practice must be described, and the reasons for it and what needs to be changed must be explained.

Recognising vulnerabilities and capacities of disaster-affected populations

In order to maximise the coping strategies of those affected by disasters, it is important to acknowledge the differing vulnerabilities, needs and capacities of affected groups. Specific factors, such as gender, age, disability and HIV/AIDS status, affect vulnerability and shape people's ability to cope and survive in a disaster context. In particular, women, children, older people and people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWH/A) may suffer specific disadvantages in coping with a disaster and may face physical, cultural and social barriers in accessing the services and support to which they are entitled. Frequently ethnic origin, religious or political affiliation, or displacement may put certain people at risk who otherwise would not be considered vulnerable.

Failure to recognise the differing needs of vulnerable groups and the barriers they face in gaining equal access to appropriate services and support can result in them being further marginalised, or even denied vital assistance. Providing information to disaster-affected populations about their right to assistance and the means of accessing this assistance is essential. The provision of such information to vulnerable groups is particularly important as they may be less able to cope and recover than others when faced with the erosion or loss of their assets, and may need more support. For these reasons, it is essential to recognise specific vulnerable groups, to understand how they are affected in different disaster contexts, and to formulate a response accordingly. Special care must be taken to protect and provide for all affected groups in a non-discriminatory manner and according to their specific needs.

However, disaster-affected populations must not be seen as helpless victims, and this includes members of vulnerable groups. They possess, and acquire, skills and capacities and have structures to cope with and respond to a disaster situation that need to be recognised and supported. Individuals, families and communities can be remarkably

resourceful and resilient in the face of disaster, and initial assessments should take account of the capacities and skills as much as of the needs and deficiencies of the affected population. Irrespective of whether a disaster is of sudden onset or develops gradually, individuals and communities will be actively coping and recovering from its effects, according to their own priorities.

The key vulnerable groups are women, children, older people, disabled people, PLWH/A and ethnic minorities. This is not an exhaustive list of vulnerable groups, but it includes those most frequently identified. Throughout the handbook, when the term ‘vulnerable groups’ is used, it refers to all these groups. There may be circumstances in which one particular group of vulnerable people is more at risk than another, but at any time of threat to one group, it is likely that others will also be at risk. In general, the handbook avoids specifying between different vulnerable groups. When any one group is at risk, users are strongly urged to think clearly of all the groups mentioned in this list.

Cross-cutting issues

In revising the handbook, care has been taken to address a number of important issues that have relevance to all sectors. These relate to 1) children, 2) older people, 3) disabled people, 4) gender, 5) protection, 6) HIV/AIDS and 7) the environment. They have been incorporated into the relevant sections of each chapter, rather than being dealt with in parallel. These particular issues were chosen on account of their relation to vulnerability, and because they were the ones most frequently raised in feedback from users of Sphere in the field. The handbook cannot address all cross-cutting issues comprehensively, but it recognises their importance.

Children Special measures must be taken to ensure the protection from harm of all children and their equitable access to basic services. As children often form the larger part of an affected population, it is crucial that their views and experiences are not only elicited during emergency assessments and planning but that they also influence humanitarian service delivery and its monitoring and evaluation. Although vulnerability in certain specificities (e.g. malnutrition,

exploitation, abduction and recruitment into fighting forces, sexual violence and lack of opportunity to participate in decision-making) can also apply to the wider population, the most harmful impact is felt by children and young people.

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is considered to be an individual below the age of 18. Depending on cultural and social contexts, however, a child may be defined differently amongst some population groups. It is essential that a thorough analysis of how a client community defines children be undertaken, to ensure that no child or young person is excluded from humanitarian services.

Older people Older women and men are those aged over 60, according to the United Nations. However, cultural and social factors mean that this definition varies from one context to another. Older people make up a large proportion of the most vulnerable in disaster-affected populations, but they also have key contributions to make in survival and rehabilitation. Isolation is the most significant factor creating vulnerability for older people in disaster situations. Along with the disruption to livelihood strategies and family and community support structures, isolation exacerbates existing vulnerabilities derived from chronic health and mobility problems and potential mental deficiencies. However, experience shows that older people are more likely to be aid givers than receivers. If supported, they can play important roles as carers, resource managers and income generators, while using their knowledge and experience of community coping strategies to help preserve the community's cultural and social identities and encourage conflict resolution.

Disabled people In any disaster, disabled people – who can be defined as those who have physical, sensory or emotional impairments or learning difficulties that make it more difficult for them to use standard disaster support services – are particularly vulnerable. To survive a period of dislocation and displacement, they need standard facilities to be as accessible for their needs as possible. They also need an enabling social support network, which is usually provided by the family.

Gender The equal rights of women and men are explicit in the human

rights documents that form the basis of the Humanitarian Charter. Women and men, and girls and boys, have the same entitlement to humanitarian assistance; to respect for their human dignity; to acknowledgement of their equal human capacities, including the capacity to make choices; to the same opportunities to act on those choices; and to the same level of power to shape the outcome of their actions.

Humanitarian responses are more effective when they are based on an understanding of the different needs, vulnerabilities, interests, capacities and coping strategies of men and women and the differing impacts of disaster upon them. The understanding of these differences, as well as of inequalities in women's and men's roles and workloads, access to and control of resources, decision-making power and opportunities for skills development, is achieved through gender analysis. Gender cuts across all the other cross-cutting issues. Humanitarian aims of proportionality and impartiality mean that attention must be paid to achieving fairness between women and men and ensuring equality of outcome.

Protection Assistance and protection are the two indivisible pillars of humanitarian action. Humanitarian agencies are frequently faced with situations where human acts or obstruction threaten the fundamental well-being or security of whole communities or sections of a population, such as to constitute violations of the population's rights as recognised by international law. This may take the form of direct threats to people's well-being, or to their means of survival, or to their safety. In the context of armed conflict, the paramount humanitarian concern is to protect people against such threats.

The form of relief assistance and the way in which it is provided can have a significant impact (positive or negative) on the affected population's security. This handbook does not provide detailed descriptions of protection strategies or mechanisms, or of how agencies should implement their responsibility. However, where possible, it refers to protection aspects or rights issues – such as the prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation, or the need to ensure adequate registration of the population – as agencies must take these into account when they are involved in providing assistance.

HIV/AIDS The coping mechanisms and resilience of communities are reduced when there is a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS and consequently the threshold for external stressors to cause a disaster may be lowered, while the amount of time a community needs to recover may be prolonged. People living with HIV/AIDS (PLWH/A) often suffer from discrimination, and therefore confidentiality must be strictly adhered to and protection made available when needed. This debilitating disease not only affects individuals but also their families and communities, as young people in their most productive years, especially women, are disproportionately affected – physically, psychologically and financially. As the pandemic matures and more people die, the demographic characteristics of communities change to leave a disproportionate number of children, including orphans, and older people. These vulnerable groups require special attention and relief programmes may need to be modified accordingly.

Environment The environment is understood as the physical, chemical and biological surroundings in which disaster-affected and local communities live and develop their livelihoods. It provides the natural resources that sustain individuals, and determines the quality of the surroundings in which they live. It needs protection if these essential functions are to be maintained. The Minimum Standards address the need to prevent over-exploitation, pollution and degradation of environmental conditions. Their proposed minimal preventive actions aim to secure the life-supporting functions of the environment, and seek to introduce mechanisms that foster the adaptability of natural systems for self-recovery.

Scope and limitations of the Sphere handbook

Agencies' ability to achieve the Minimum Standards will depend on a range of factors, some of which are within their control while others, such as political and security factors, may lie outside their control. Of particular importance are the extent to which agencies have access to the affected population, whether they have the consent and cooperation of the authorities in charge, and whether they can operate in conditions of reasonable security. Equally critical is the availability of sufficient financial, human and material resources.

While the Humanitarian Charter is a general statement of humanitarian principles, this handbook alone cannot constitute a complete evaluation guide or set of criteria for humanitarian action. First, the Minimum Standards do not cover all the possible forms of appropriate humanitarian assistance. Second, there will inevitably be situations where it may be difficult, if not impossible, to meet all of the standards. There are many factors – including lack of access or insecurity, insufficient resources, the involvement of other actors and non-compliance with international law – that contribute to creating extremely difficult conditions in which to carry out humanitarian work.

For example, agencies may find that the resources at their disposal are insufficient to meet the needs of the affected population; prioritisation of needs and response and advocacy for the removal of the obstacles that hinder adequate assistance and protection may then be necessary. In situations where the vulnerability of local populations to disaster is high or where there is widespread poverty or prolonged conflict, it can be the case that the Minimum Standards exceed normal everyday living conditions. Since this can give rise to resentment, local conditions must be taken into account, and programmes should always be designed with equality of the affected and surrounding populations in mind.

It is recognised that in many cases not all of the indicators and standards will be met – however, users of this book should strive to meet them as well as they can. In the initial phase of a response, for example, providing basic facilities for all the affected population may be more important than reaching the Minimum Standards and indicators for only a proportion of the population. This handbook cannot cover every question or resolve every dilemma. What it can do is serve as a starting point, using standards and indicators based on consensus derived from years of experience and good practice; guidance notes designed to offer practical direction; and the Humanitarian Charter, which suggests a legal framework and a basis for advocacy.

The Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards will not solve all of the problems of humanitarian response, nor can they prevent all human suffering. What they offer is a tool for humanitarian agencies to enhance the effectiveness and quality of their assistance, and thus to make a significant difference to the lives of people affected by disaster.