



# The Sphere Project

*Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards  
in Humanitarian Response*

## **Humanitarian standards in context** *Bringing the Sphere Handbook to life*

Video guide

training and learning

**Humanitarian standards in context**  
***Bringing the Sphere Handbook to life***  
**Video guide**

Published by the Sphere Project, Geneva, June 2013.  
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### **Global standards and contextualisation**

The development of global standards has become increasingly prevalent from the earliest examples of standardised principles, such as the Order of Malta in 1048, up to the International Standards Organisation 9001 used today, which sets out quality standards for the private sector.

Standards are a commonly used tool to ensure consistency, quality and accountability in personal conduct and professional activities. The success of global standards depends on their being equally applicable in a wide range of contexts, taking into account political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental factors. Global standards give us a way of analysing and communicating about our performance both formally and informally so we can improve for the future.

The Sphere Handbook sets out global minimum standards to improve quality and accountability in humanitarian responses.

### **What does Sphere say about context?**

Effective humanitarian response must be based on a comprehensive contextualised diagnosis attained through assessment, monitoring and evaluation. The context in the aftermath of a disaster is dynamic and can impact the capacities and vulnerabilities of affected people. For example, a disaster may change normal social structures such as gender roles within the affected population.

The change in the context may present challenges to be overcome, or opportunities to bring a community closer to meeting their rights. The Sphere Handbook's elements – minimum standards, key actions, key indicators and guidance notes – all provide information on assisting people to meet their rights after a disaster. Minimum standards are an expression of these rights rooted in the Humanitarian Charter and Protection Principles and should not be adapted to the context.

They help humanitarian actors determine the cut-off point between stable survival in dignity and heightened risks of mortality and morbidity. Key actions and key indicators, however, need to be selected for relevancy and, in certain situations, carefully adapted to fit the context.

Adapting a key action or indicator means changing aspects of it in order to make it more suitable to the specific situation. Guidance notes help practitioners to put indicators into context properly.

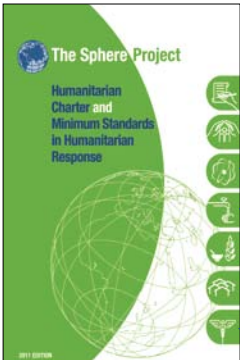
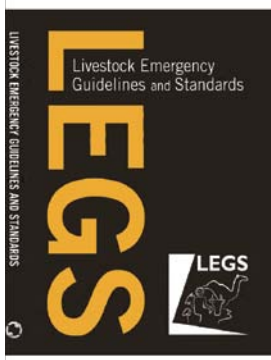
### **Scenario 1:** **Floods in Sindh,** **Pakistan (2010) –** **Livestock support**

#### **Background**

In 2010, the monsoon season in Pakistan overwhelmed the country with floods which affected 21 million people. In Thatta district, Sindh province, an NGO responded with a programme that involved re-stocking of livestock to affected families. This scenario explores how the organisation dealt with principles and key indicators that were difficult to implement in context.

**NOTES**

## Links with Sphere

Related elements of the Sphere Handbook		Page	Companion
	Humanitarian Charter and Code of Conduct Principles 1, 5-9	20-24 370-372	
	Protection Principle 1	33	
	Core Standards 1, 3 and 4	55, 61, 65	
	Hygiene promotion standard 1	91	
	Control of communicable diseases standard 1 (key indicator 1)	312	

## Issues at stake and contextualisation

Through context assessment, the organisation observed that before the floods, people lived very close to their livestock, which can cause increased levels of disease. The issue for the organisation was whether to meet the expressed need of the affected people, given that to do so could perpetuate unhealthy practices and make them more vulnerable to disease.

The Code of Conduct and Core Standards remind us that we should respect culture and custom and develop strategies that are explicitly linked to community-based capacities. At the same time, the Control of communicable diseases standard 1 (key indicator 1) and Protection Principle 1 explicitly say that disease levels should be kept stable and no further harm should be caused by humanitarian interventions.

## Outcome

Based on a participatory needs assessment, the organisation designed a programme that met the community's need to re-establish livelihoods by re-stocking with animals. Steps were taken to mitigate the negative impacts of people living close to animals through hygiene promotion activities. Control of communicable diseases standard 1: key indicator: Incidence of major communicable diseases relevant to the context are stable (not increasing) was met.

## Lesson learned

Sphere key actions and key indicators can be selected and prioritised to fit the context. Shorter-term programmes can be designed to get people back to normal while mitigating any risks. Longer-term programmes could address the underlying causes of vulnerability by, for example, educating people so they may eventually decide to change unhealthy cultural practices.

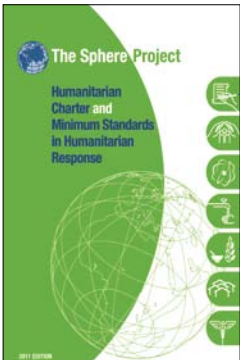
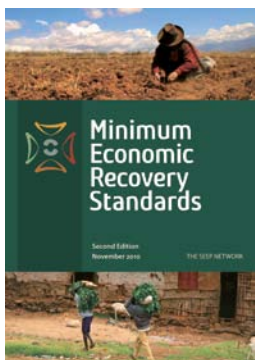
### **Scenario 2:** **Earthquake in** **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa** **Province (KPK),** **Pakistan (2005) –** **Cash for work**

#### **Background**

In 2005, northern Pakistan experienced an earthquake which killed over 70,000 people. A local NGO responded by helping survivors to re-establish livelihoods. This scenario explores how a change in context may present an opportunity to bring people closer to meeting Sphere key indicators.

**NOTES**

## Links with Sphere

Related elements of the Sphere Handbook	Page	Companion
	Humanitarian Charter and Code of Conduct Principles 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9	20-24 370-372
	Protection Principles 1 and 2	33, 36
	Core Standards 1, 3, 4 and 5	55, 61, 65, 68
	Livelihoods standard 2 (key indicator 2)	208
		

## Issues at stake and contextualisation

The social context in KPK changed because of the earthquake in that many male heads of household were lost, leaving females in a position to assume responsibility for their families. Through monitoring activities, the organisation saw that females were often left out of assistance and decision-making processes. The Code of Conduct, Protection Principle 2 and Livelihoods standard 2 all highlight that men and women should have equal access humanitarian aid based on their needs. The issue for this organisation was how to provide cash-for-work assistance appropriately in the context while yet respecting culture and custom in a traditional society in which females who work, their families and the aid agency could run risks if they are seen as going against social norms.

## Outcome

The organisation opted to keep the key indicator as it was and use the change in context as an opportunity to bring people closer to the livelihoods indicator. The organisation took a phased approach that included raising awareness of rights for both men and women. They gained acceptance from the community to ensure that the programme did not increase vulnerability or pose further risks. Livelihoods standard 2, key indicator 2 was partially met. Men and some women were given opportunities for employment without increasing their vulnerability.

## Lesson learned

Organisations, even if they have been working in a country for a long time, need to assess how a disaster has changed the context in order to make effective programming decisions. When the decision is made to introduce new concepts and approaches, it is important to gain acceptance from the community at each stage to ensure that people are protected from harm and risks are managed.

### **Scenario 3:**

## **Protracted conflict, North Kivu Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – WASH**

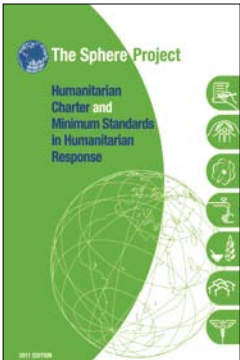
### **Background**

For many years, the conflict taking place in North Kivu province has caused internal displacement, necessitating temporary shelter to provide people with life-saving assistance. An NGO is providing a water supply programme to help people meet their rights. This scenario explores how organisations may cope with lack of resources to meet Sphere indicators.

**NOTES**



## Links with Sphere

Related elements of the Sphere Handbook		Page	
	Humanitarian Charter and Code of Conduct Principles 1, 2, 5-8	20-24 370-372	
	Protection Principles 1 and 2	33, 36	
	Core Standards 1, 3 and 4	55, 61, 65	
	Water supply standard 1 (key indicator 1)	97	
	Water supply standards 2 and 3	100, 103	

## Issues at stake and contextualisation

In this context, people are made vulnerable by on-going conflict which has put pressure on environmental and technological resources throughout the province. The issue in this scenario was that it was physically impossible for the organisation alone to provide Water supply standard 1, key indicator 1 (15 litres of water per person per day (pppd) for cooking, drinking and personal and domestic hygiene) for the target group.

The Code of Conduct, Protection Principles and Core Standards indicate that local capacities should be built upon while vulnerabilities are addressed. The needs assessment also revealed that in this context, men often bathed in the river (local capacity), while women and children bathed at home because it was safer for them.

## Outcome

The organisation analysed the situation and looked for ways to build on the community's existing capacity and address the water supply needs of the entire target group. The organisation provided a water supply programme that met Water supply standard 1, key indicator 1 using a combination of assistance from the organisation and local capacity.

## Lesson learned

Guidance notes help to interpret indicators and prioritise activities in an environment of limited resources. A solid understanding of the social, technological and environmental context along with Sphere guidance notes helped the NGO to find a solution that met the needs.

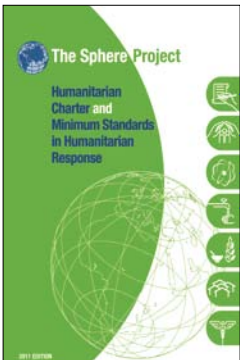
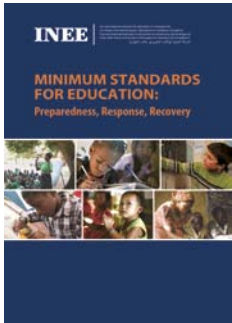
### **Scenario 4:** **Protracted conflict,** **Bunagana, DRC –** **School supplemental** **food programme**

#### **Background**

For many years, the conflict taking place in DRC has limited the communities' ability to produce/ provide enough food for themselves. An NGO is providing supplemental food rations in a school. This scenario explores how organisations may adapt a quantitative key indicator to the context.

**NOTES**

## Links with Sphere

Related elements of the Sphere Handbook	Page	Companion
	Humanitarian Charter and Code of Conduct Principles 1, 5, 6-8	
	Protection Principle 1	
	Core Standards 1, 2, 3, 4	
	Hygiene promotion standard 1	
	Food transfers standard 1 (key indicator 1)	
	Food transfers standards 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	

## Issues at stake and contextualisation

Guidance note 2 accompanying the first key indicator of Food Transfers Standard 1 says that nutritional requirements equal 2,100 kilocalories (kcal) pppd, but people in this community have no more than 1,600 kcals pppd even in non-disaster times. The organisation had to decide whether to adapt the indicator to align it with the norm in the society or to provide the Sphere indicator as written.

The Code of Conduct says that aid should be based on need alone, and scientific evidence has shown that human beings need a certain number of calories with specific nutritional content to lead an active and healthy life. Protection Principle 1 also states that we should not cause further harm through our actions by not providing enough food or by providing too much food.

## Outcome

Children at the school received a supplemental wet food ration to close the gap between existing food capacity and the key indicator. The key indicator was adapted from 2,100 kcal pppd to 1,600 kcal pppd because this is the norm in the context and the organisation determined that the recipients could live a healthy and active lifestyle on the adapted indicator. Active participation and collaboration with parents of the students and other actors in the humanitarian community have been essential to the success of the programme. The contextualised Food transfers standard 1: key indicator 1 was met.

## Lesson learned

Members of the humanitarian community worked together in order to gain a consensus on the context. Based on their understanding, they adapted the number of kilocalories in the Sphere key indicator to a lower amount. Effective collaboration with the community ensured that parents take an active role in the programme to meet their children's needs. Sphere key indicators can be adapted with a sound understanding of the context. If a Sphere indicator is thus adapted, monitoring mechanisms should be designed to ensure that no harm results. (Ex: In this scenario, applicable health and nutrition-related indicators for the recipients should be monitored).

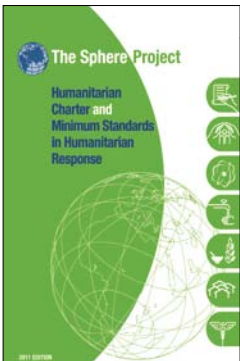
**Scenario 5:**  
**Earthquake and  
floods, La Paz,  
Bolivia – Disaster  
risk reduction**

**Background**

As part of a disaster risk reduction initiative, the Bolivian government has used Sphere for guidance. The scenario explores how a government can benefit from Sphere in context.

NOTES

## Links with Sphere

Related elements of the Sphere Handbook		Page	
	Cross-cutting issues	14-17	
	Humanitarian Charter and Code of Conduct Annex 1	20-24 373	
	Protection Principles 3 and 4	38, 41	
	Core Standard 2	58	
	Shelter and settlement standards	240-267	

## Issues at stake and contextualisation

The issue here is the extent to which a government can use a tool developed by and primarily for the humanitarian community. This scenario indicates that there are specific parts of the Sphere Handbook which can be applied:

- The Humanitarian Charter, which reminds us that the state holds primary responsibility to respond to disasters in a timely manner.
- The Code of Conduct Annex I: Recommendations to the Governments of Disaster-Affected Countries.
- Protection Principles 3 and 4, which are directly linked to a specific set of legal obligations of states.
- Core Standard 2, which specifically discusses the role of government in collaboration and coordination of humanitarian response.
- Cross-cutting issues which can be applied through government response, including children, disaster risk reduction, environment, gender, HIV and AIDS, older people, persons with disabilities and psychosocial support.
- Technical standards, which can also be used by governments throughout the disaster management cycle.

Certain countries have adapted and included elements of Sphere into their policies and contextualised indicators to align with national standards.

## Outcome

A government has used Sphere standards to develop disaster risk reduction policies and train staff members so they are ready to respond to future disasters. Sphere indicators have been adapted so they conform to Bolivian standards and policies.

## Lesson learned

Sphere can be a useful tool for any actor engaging in humanitarian work. Sphere provides information on fundamental global humanitarian principles that can be applied in any context. Sphere minimum standards are an expression of these rights. Key actions and key indicators may be selected and adapted to the context for effective use of the Sphere Handbook.