

Interpreting and Training the 2011 Sphere Handbook

Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response

from a Trainer's Perspective

By Jim Good



A “Wordle” of the 2011 Sphere Handbook: the size of a word is proportional to the number of times the word appears in the text of the handbook.

A Trainer's Perspective

As a long-time Sphere trainer and disaster management consultant I have always enjoyed training and leading workshop groups in navigating the Sphere document and explaining the Sphere approach. After working with the 2011 Sphere handbook as a trainer throughout 2012 and 2013 I have realized that there is much more change here than first meets the eye, and that for those who have been training with Sphere for some time, simply explaining the new features is not adequate. The shift in structure and emphasis in the 2011 Edition is significant. The purpose of this short article is to share some insights into strategies for introducing people to the new Sphere document - in particular those training groups that have seen or referenced the older versions of Sphere, but have not yet used the new 2011 version.

Recently, some new guidance has been issued from Sphere in the form of training materials to help users understand the new edition. These materials focus on the new changes in 2011 Sphere handbook and do a good job in doing so – particularly the new video “Humanitarian Standards in Context - Bringing the Sphere Handbook to Life”, which explains different contexts in which Sphere can be used.

What has been done less well, so far, is to explain the uses and limitations of the technical chapters that follow the Core Standards or to address the change in usability of the Sphere text as a handbook for looking up current best practice indicators for sectoral specialists and also for those who need to work in those specific areas of WASH, food, shelter, and health but who are themselves not experts. This article attempts to fill in some of those gaps, and help trainers already familiar with the older Sphere editions better help others to navigate and apply the new 2011 Sphere document.

Sphere Lives On – New and Improved

The 2011 Edition of the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response is now published in several languages, available online, and has been in use for over a year. As in its previous editions, it remains an essential core document for anyone involved in the humanitarian response field. Its straightforward structure of Humanitarian Principles (Charter, Protection Principles, and Core Standards), understandable and practical sectoral Standards, clear Actions, and measurable Indicators make it a directly usable and pragmatic guide for field practitioners as well as an excellent training resource for those who want to see the bigger picture of an overall emergency operation.

The following short analysis of the 2011 Edition of Sphere pertains mainly to using the document for training, and dealing with the kinds of questions that trainers get when doing Sphere training. It provides a nuanced look at the evolution of the Sphere document over time and in particular, some significant changes that have occurred between the previous and current editions of which trainers should be aware. These changes mainly relate to the “contextualization” of the Sphere approach - the current edition has been modified in an attempt to make the document more sensitive to differences in local contexts and the many different ways that Sphere has been used in the field. These changes are described below in terms of **structure, tone, and emphasis**, mainly because these aspects reflect the way that trainers often need to deal with the material and to explain the sense of the document to training audiences.

Working with Sphere as a Training Resource Over the Last Decade

The **structure** of the Sphere document through its several previous editions has been more or less constant with clarifications added in each subsequent edition. At its core, Sphere is an aspirational document about rights and protection and has, from the beginning, been balanced with a practical structure to advise practitioners on what to do with these aspirations in the normal sectors of humanitarian work. Its emphasis has been on professionalism in the humanitarian field and on the idea that there are, in fact, professional standards of practice that should be followed.

The **emphasis** set by Sphere has been one of plain logic of a rights-driven rather than charity-driven response, where a clear chain of links could be made from individual rights, to needs, to established best practices in meeting these needs. By setting global Standards and Indicators it professed to make clear the goals of humanitarian work and provide a

measurable scale for evaluation so that professionals could better determine success after the fact, and better plan for success before emergencies struck. It avoided advising on strategies, and focused on results. **The 2011 edition has continued in this track generally, but has downplayed the indicators and objective measures, while significantly reinforcing and elevating the importance of community involvement, transparency, and participation as the best way to achieve humanitarian aims.**

Trainers need to be able to deliver a narrative or story-line about their topic if they are to help people better understand and remember it. Storytelling is important and different trainers can tell the story in different ways and still be effective, but there has to be a story. Telling the story of Sphere and explaining its set of themes, focus, tone and structure over its first decade has been relatively easy and effective with a straightforward narrative line that has gone something like this:

1. We have a Humanitarian Charter. It is an ideal and philosophical statement of what we as humanitarians are supposed to do. And it is not just an ideal, it is rooted in international law – in particular, the areas of Human Rights, Humanitarian and Refugee Law uphold this Charter. Through these laws, key principles were laid down clearly, with the central theme being that we all have a fundamental right to life with dignity.
2. This fundamental right is made clearer, and more practically real for practitioners, by associating them to more physically measurable rights that affect the day-to-day existence of disaster survivors in practical ways. These are described as Standards in several sector-related chapters representing different human needs (or fields of humanitarian responders) Food, Shelter, Water, Sanitation, Health. These Standards are written in vague and hard to measure, but absolutely unassailable, terms such as “adequate”, “sufficient”, or “effective”. No one can argue that people should not have “adequate” food; however, there might be long arguments about what constitutes “Adequate” under any given context.
3. These standards are then made measurable and practicable through the identification of key indicators that signal whether or not a standard has been met. The now famous 3.5 m² of space under roof, for example, was laid down as a measurable indicator, that while imperfect in many ways, did force practitioners to grapple with the practical question of “how much space is enough?” As a trainer, there was always an “out” at hand for use when the local context proved a particular indicator wrong or inappropriate. That is the reminder that these are only indicators – not emergencies in themselves. In other words, an indicator that something is wrong is a warning sign that the situation should be further investigated or analyzed. The humanitarian practitioner is supposed to take note when an indicator is showing that there may be problems in achieving the higher-level Standard concerned, and should check it out. So, for example, if after examination, the indicator of less than 3.5 m² per person is not being met, but people are happy, healthy, and living in dignity, then everything is fine. The point is that the indicators are distinct, clear and plainly show when one must investigate further.

4. Finally guidance notes bring out issues of context, caveats, and advice on how to achieve these indicators.

Until the 2011 Edition, this structural approach was straightforward to describe as a trainer. This is not to say that all of the indicators were well written, or appropriate, but simply that the overall ways of understanding them and dealing with them was clear.

What's New?

The 2011 Edition is different, in structure, emphasis, and tone. At first glance the basic storyline for trainers is mainly the same, but there are some new changes that do not quite follow the historical story line. The overall structure is the same as the previous editions with the helpful addition of new Core Standards (which replace the 2004 Edition's "Common Standards"), Protection Principles (all new), and Key Actions (a new component). The Charter has been re-written with a less direct link to international law sources, but does have a clearer sense of purpose, and is written in clear language. The Protection Principles and Core Standards are a good and needed collection of ideas to help practitioners remember the central themes of a right to life with dignity.

The tone of the document has shifted away from simple sectoral professionalism concerned primarily with knowing **what to do** (standards and indicator-focused) to a more socially-aware and community-empowering approach, with a reinforced emphasis of **the right way to do** humanitarian work using participatory methods (current shift towards Key Actions, and Guidance Notes). The new language in the introductory section ("What is Sphere?") reads (page 5):

"The inclusion of affected populations in the consultative process lies at the heart of Sphere's philosophy. The Sphere Project, consequently, was one of the first of what are now known as the quality and accountability (Q&A) initiatives."

The current document constantly reminds practitioners of the importance of this in each of its sectoral chapters, as well as in the Core Standards. An important paragraph for trainers to take note of in the new 2011 Sphere document is included under the Guidance Notes supporting the Design and Response Standard of the Core Standards (page 67).

"The foundation of life with dignity is the assurance of access to basic services, security and respect for human rights. Equally, the **way** (emphasis in the original text) in which humanitarian response is implemented strongly affects the dignity and well-being of the disaster-affected population. Programme approaches that respect the intrinsic value of each individual, support their religious and cultural identity, promote community-based self-help and encourage positive social support networks all contribute to psychosocial well-being and are an essential element of people's right to life with dignity."

This is an important point that has been significantly reinforced from the previous editions of Sphere, in that the **way** to provide relief is an end in itself, has its own standards and many, many notes and references throughout the entire text. While the 2004 Sphere did list “Participation” as one of its “Common Standards” this element has become much more central and of a higher level of importance in the overall text.

Training to the Change in Emphasis

On reading through the 2011 Sphere handbook, one may feel that there is more general advice of a “take it or leave it” nature, depending on local context, and fewer genuine global objective benchmarks in the form of Indicators. There was some criticism of previous Sphere editions that there were “too many indicators”, and that the tone and approach of the book did not adequately address the complex issues of multiple contexts. In addressing this criticism, many of the previous Key Indicators have now been moved to the Guidance Notes, or are recast in the Key Actions sections of the document. A word count of the 2004 and 2011 editions on some key words and terms came up with the following (imperfect, but still revealing) comparison. The columns below reflect the total number of times a certain word (or variant of the word) appears in the document. The “Increase” column below simply shows the increase in the number of times a word (or words) were used between 2011 and 2004 and the “Change Adjusted for Word Inflation” column adjusts the figure for overall increase of words in the new Edition, i.e. shows the number of times a word is referenced as a percentage of the total number of words in either the 2004 or the 2011 document.

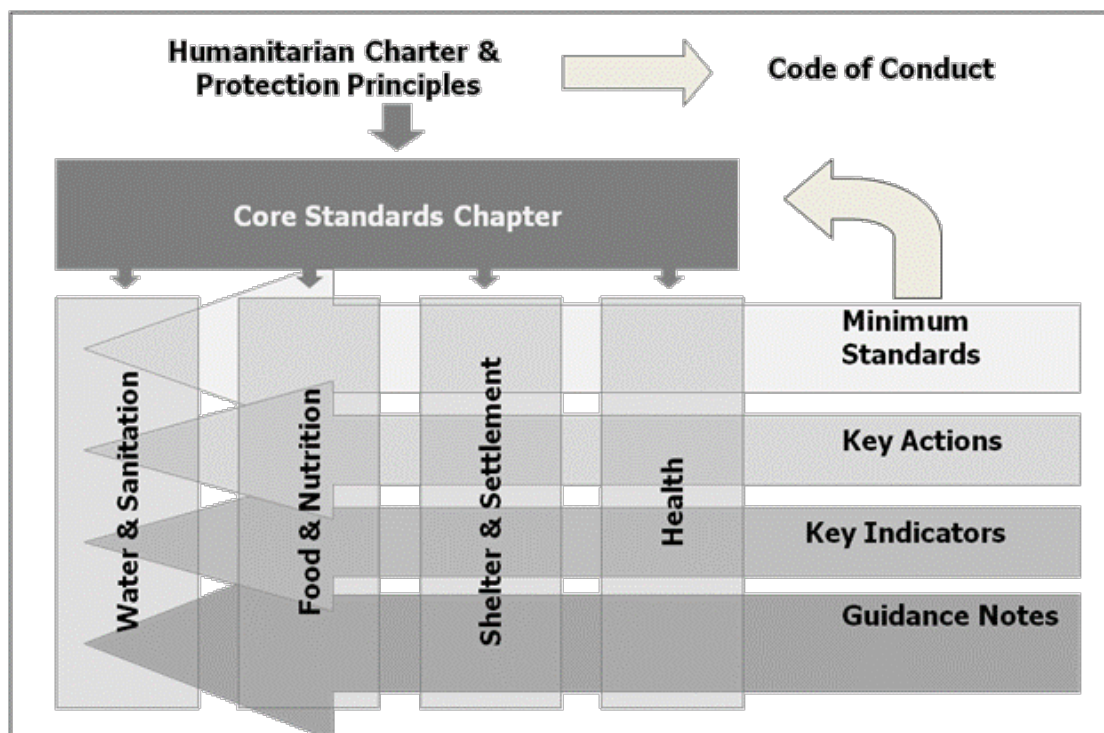
Sphere 2004 and 2011 Word Counts

Words	2004	2011	INCREASE	CHANGE ADJUSTED FOR WORD INFLATION
Guidance	478	809	169%	4%
Standard(s)	394	704	179%	9%
Indicator(s)	137	153	1%	-31%
Protection	69	262	380%	57%
Principle(s)	39	203	521%	67%
Transparency (Transparent)	15	26	173%	4%
Accountability (Accountable)	19	45	237%	45%
TOTAL WORD COUNT	65,929	107,067	162%	N/A

Without reading too much into this kind of analysis, it does illustrate some useful patterns that trainers familiar with the older Sphere editions need to understand. Plainly, discussions about principles, accountability, and protection are on the rise in the new edition. Likewise, the Indicators are losing ground. Does this mean a general backing off of measurable Indicators, and global measures for success? One approach for the trainer in this regard is to approach the entire Sphere document as a more “advisory and flexible guide adaptable to multiple contexts” rather than as a professional “Code” to be measured, monitored, evaluated, and followed.

Training to the New Structure

In general, as a trainer, the higher-level elements (Humanitarian Charter, Protection Principles, and Core Standards) are clear and straightforward in figuring out and delivering a training approach. The Core Standards support the overall work of anyone working in any sector and the arguments are made well. There is good general guidance for anyone considering the higher ethical dilemmas that field work usually involves and the links down the chain of Charter to Principles to Standards, Actions, Indicators and Guidance is maintained.



The newly added Key Actions, however, can present a bit of a problem for trainers as they are relatively unclear in their purpose, and seem to be simply another (more action-oriented) way of writing a Key Indicator. Inserted between the Standards and the Indicators, they appear to be a higher-level of importance than the Indicators; however, the explanatory text

seems to indicate that they are more of an advisory nature than the indicators. The explanation below is provided by Sphere.

“Next, practical key actions are suggested, to attain the minimum standard. Some actions may not be applicable in all contexts, and it is up to the practitioner to select the relevant actions and devise alternative actions that will result in the standard being met.”(page 7.)

A close reading of any section’s comparative Key Actions and Key Indicators shows that these two lists are essentially the same type of information simply put forth in a different type of sentence structure, i.e. any of the indicators could be written as key actions, and all of the key actions could equally well be written as indicators. For example, the key action listed under the heading “Drainage” in the WASH chapter (page 121) reads;

Key Action - “Provide appropriate drainage facilities so that dwelling areas and water distribution points are kept free of standing wastewater and that stormwater drains are kept clear.”

This could also be written as a Key Indicator as follows: “Dwelling areas and water distribution points are free of standing wastewater, and have working drainage facilities including functioning and unclogged stormwater drains”

The distinction between Indicators and Actions in the 2011 Sphere document is further complicated by Sphere’s own uncertain description of the relationship.

“Then, a set of key indicators serves as ‘signals’ that show whether a standard has been attained. They provide a way of measuring and communicating the processes and results of key actions. The key indicators relate to the minimum standard, not to the key action”(page 7).

It is difficult for most trainees (and trainers) to understand how the indicators can measure, but not relate to the key actions. This leaves the trainer in a fairly tenuous position when trying to explain precisely what this means.

One can come to the conclusion that the key actions and indicators are of the same type of information and represent concrete things that can be done and measured. Using the definitions and carefully chosen wording within the Sphere text, the implication is that key actions are simply advisory, and due to wide varieties of context, that only the practitioner on the spot should decide on which actions apply, whereas this caveat does not extend to the key indicators, which, by definition are then more universal and “relate to the standards” in a more direct way.

If this interpretation is right, it can be helpful to change the order of the Key Actions and Key Indicators to reflect that relationship when presenting them to a training audience. Perhaps the easiest way for the trainer to explain this is to philosophically relocate the Key Actions into the realm of the Guidance Notes which are already well-set and explained as being in the context-ruled universe of ideas, as opposed to being in the universal principle realm of the Charter, Protection Principles, and Core Standards.

The Guidance Notes do provide guidance and a wealth of information to the student wanting to learn about the ins and outs of humanitarian programs as well as to practitioners looking

for best practice advice and genuine international norms in program planning. It is interesting to note, however, that even in this regard the 2011 Sphere text is rather tentative. For example, in its definition of the Guidance Notes, the document states:

“They may also include critical issues relating to the standards, actions or indicators and describe dilemmas, controversies or gaps in current knowledge. They do not provide guidance as to **how to** implement a specific activity” (emphasis original, page 8).

This is also difficult for the trainer to explain, given that a review of the guidance notes finds that they do not bring up many dilemmas, do not show or illustrate many gaps in current knowledge, and do, in fact, provide advice on **the best ways to** undertake program activities – sometimes quite specifically. Much of the advice provided is in the form of considerations to be taken in carrying out humanitarian activities and often relates to ways to effectively deal with the local community and context appropriately.

When a trainer is challenged by participants to explain the difference between levels of the Sphere “hierarchy” and or type of information contained in the Guidance Notes, Key Actions, and Key Indicators it is easy to get bogged down by numerous examples within the document where there is really not a legitimate reason why a particular item or idea is listed one way or another within the Sphere structure. For example, the following statements are from the 2011 Sphere handbook and represent a Standard, Key Indicator, Key Action, or Guidance Note.

Challenge Yourself ... can you identify which of the following is which a Standard, Action, Indicator, or Guidance Note?

- 1. There is adequate access to a range of foods, including a staple (cereal or tuber), pulses (or animal products) and fat sources, that together meet nutritional requirements.**
- 2. Foods must conform to the food standards of the recipient government and/or the Codex Alimentarius standards with regard to quality, packaging, labeling and ‘fitness for purpose’.**
- 3. Debris resulting from the disaster is removed from key locations including the sites of damaged or destroyed homes, temporary communal settlements, essential public buildings and access routes.**
- 4. Health services are provided by trained and competent health workforces who have an adequate mix of knowledge and skills to meet the health needs of the population.**

Let’s see how well have you done:

Statement #1 is a Key indicator (page 180) although it is a poorly written one due to the word “adequate”, which traditionally was the sure sign of a standard – not an indicator.

Statement #2 is a Guidance Note (page 187) but it sounds rather like an indicator to be met.

Statement #3 is a key action, (page 250) but it sounds like an indicator. I have removed the starting verb to make the case in this instance. The phrase actually starts with the words

“Ensure that debris resulting from ...” At least by sentence structure, then, this is a key action.

Statement #4 is a Standard but it reads like an Indicator or Guidance Note (see page 301).

And of course, as in the results of all committee actions, there are simply some errors and poorly chosen words. The trainer should in these cases simply stand ready to accept shortcomings, and not be overly defensive, and explain that although flawed, it is still the best we have. Some trainers will find statements included in various parts of the text that are seemingly impossible and actually not attempted in a good emergency response, such as, “All members of each affected household should be involved to the maximum extent possible in determining the type of shelter assistance to be provided.” This would inevitably mean slow or no response and total chaos, benefitting no-one. This example is a Guidance Note under “Participatory design” (page 260). In such cases where the idea is clear, but the statement is simply too overreaching, it is best for the trainer to fall back to the idea of the statement, rather than the exact text.

Finally, Sphere provides an Index. It is not helpful in finding the bits you need in a hurry. This index is obviously a quick program-generated list of words and page numbers, and provides little useful help in navigating the text. For example, under the term “disaster” in the Index, there are 196 undifferentiated page numbers – too much for most readers to look through.

One Trainer’s Advice

As a trainer using this text, there are some useful strategies to consider when explaining the overall nature of the book and its component parts. While trainers should take their own experience and perspectives into play, the following four strategies may be helpful in helping trainees make the best use of the 2011 Sphere document.

Strategy 1. The Sphere Traditionalist – In some cases, certain indicators, key actions, or Guidance Notes may be (or may seem to be) in conflict with one another when applied to local concrete examples. The traditional, and still largely workable, strategy is to use the structure of the Sphere document as a guide. There is a genuine hierarchy to the Sphere structure, and whenever there are conflicts or dilemmas, one should fall back to the higher level, i.e. the Humanitarian Charter is more important than the Principles, which in turn are more important than the particular standards, which are higher than the Actions and Indicators, which are of more universal value than the guidance notes. If reference to the structural hierarchy solves the question at hand, well and good.

Strategy 2. The Pragmatist - When #1 above fails, the following explanation is useful (albeit contradictory). The current structure has perhaps become more complex in trying to meet many demands and audiences (contextualization). As a result, it is imperfect in many instances. However, all of it is useful for consideration, and has been vetted by practitioners who have developed this material through direct experience. Therefore don’t worry about the hierarchy, or the absolute rightness of any of it, but rather use whatever you can find within

the handbook to help you do better work. If a certain aspect doesn't apply or seems to go against local best practice, don't use it.

Strategy 3. The Individualist – This strategy isn't so much about solving dilemmas, but more about helping users navigate the Sphere document and learn the most applicable parts for their own context. The Sphere guidance, while well vetted, is still only advisory so users should look for the bits that suit their needs at the moment. To do that well, one needs to read the entire handbook, and practically mark one's own book with highlights and sticky notes to guide you back to those bits that you think will arise in your own work. The trainer's rallying call for this approach is, "Make this Sphere your own! Annotate it, redline it, and make it useful for yourself."

Strategy 4. The Apologist – Occasionally participants in Sphere trainings will pick out specific language which they find "over the top" and use this to debunk the entire document. For example, one participant hit on the following language "No incidents are reported of harm to people in the routine use of stoves and the sourcing of and storage of fuel" (page 274). This person held that this is an impossible measure to meet in any country at any time, as there are always accidents, even when adequate safety measures have been taken. People sometimes make mistakes. The participant then went on to imply that this unattainable level of safety or care was similarly high (and therefore unrealistic) throughout the entire document. In such instances fall back to the meaning of the statement – minimize harm to people using stoves by supplying safer models and training people in safe operation – rather than the exact words. When all else fails, simply remind everyone that this is a human product and it has some errors. Even so it is by far one of the most useful guides available today for humanitarian field work.

Conclusions

The 2011 Sphere guide remains a classic volume for guidance in humanitarian field work in terms of both training and field use. The 2011 Edition does have some significant differences from previous versions. Its title has changed from Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in *Disaster* Response to Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in *Humanitarian* Response. More than the title has changed in this instance. Particularly if you have been using the previous editions of Sphere in trainings, and are familiar with them, you should carefully review the differences in this current version. There is a shift away from its trademark indicators as measures of outcomes reflecting achievement of standards, and a shift towards greater protection and participation as companion key goals and strategies.

In purely technical manual terms, the index has never been extremely useful, and in the 2011 Edition it is even less so. Structurally, the book is more complex than in previous versions with some new components (Protection Principles, Core Standards, and Key Actions). As in any revised Edition with new components there is some overlap among these and, in some instances, it may be difficult to navigate to the information you are looking for based on the structure alone. This will likely improve in subsequent Editions, particularly as the Key Actions are considered and evaluated over time.

There has been a general shift in emphasis towards greater flexibility in the use of Sphere in different contexts. There is now relatively more information on key principles and

humanitarian thought and strategy, particularly the participatory approach, and less of an emphasis on objective, measurable, and global benchmark indicators of success in meeting humanitarian standards. One example is the current downgrading of many of the previous editions' "indicators", to the current edition's "Guidance Notes".

There has always been a balance between the sense that "there is no one size-fits-all approach" in the humanitarian field and the need to establish a professional set of universal indicators for humanitarians to follow. Sphere has been successful in navigating that balance carefully by promoting and gathering consensus on measurable indicators, while avoiding dogmatic adherence to them in favor of the much more flexible (but less measurable) Standards. The introduction of the Key Actions in some ways has blurred the distinction between the different elements of Sphere, as they are a sort of bridge between Standards and indicators and begin to offer guidance to humanitarians on more than the Standards and measurable indicators. These now advise practitioners on what to do, which is not far from telling them "how to do it".

Sphere remains a guiding light and the closest thing we have to a truly universal guide – without any one donor's, agency's, NGO's, or other proprietary mark on it. It is truly dedicated to the common good and does not adhere to any one organization's mandate, philosophy, or approach. It is, however, slowly but surely, developing and reinforcing its own – which trainers should become very familiar with before undertaking training with it.

Finally, it should be noted that these changes in the 2011 edition may be more of a challenge to trainers who are more familiar with the older Sphere editions, due to the shift in philosophy and emphasis. Those just picking it up for the first time will not have to deal with their own preconceptions about what Sphere is.

This article was written by Jim Good of InterWorks, LLC. Jim has been a Sphere contributor and trainer since the First Edition appeared in 2000.