Strategy 2015

... Right to Life with Dignity
What is Sphere?

Sphere is an initiative to define and uphold the standards by which the global community responds to the plight of people affected by disasters. It does this principally through a set of guidelines that are set out in the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response (universally known as the Sphere Handbook).

Sphere’s Vision

*Sphere is working for a world where the right of all people affected by disaster to re-establish their lives and livelihoods is recognised and acted upon in ways that respect their voice and promote their dignity, livelihoods and security.*

Sphere after a decade

The Sphere Project has been running in various forms since 1997. From a very early stage it was recognised that the quality of humanitarian response did not depend solely or even primarily on a set of technical standards, but also on an approach and philosophy of action that listened and responded to the opinions of people affected by disasters. Hence the terms “quality” and “accountability” have become very closely associated, to the point of becoming almost inseparable.

This message has not been always easy to communicate. Many agencies claim to work “to Sphere standards”, by which they mean little more than observing the quantitative indicators in the technical sector guidelines. This poor adoption of Sphere has been exacerbated over the past decade by the entry of many new actors into the humanitarian arena. Many are organisations that do not come from the same humanitarian tradition as Sphere’s proponents, such as the military or private contractors. Others, such as some religious organisations or local citizen’s groups, may share the same values, but lack the operational experience and capacity to do justice to the Sphere standards.

Despite this, Sphere has been also used with great effectiveness and success in numerous contexts. There are encouraging examples of spontaneous local attempts to replicate and disseminate Sphere, as evidenced by the more than 25 languages into which the Sphere Handbook has been translated, and the
emergence of *Sphere Honduras* and *Sphere India* as two examples of local organisations which champion Sphere on their own initiative.

Sphere was conceived as a project to develop standards and train people in their use. Ultimately, however, its success will be measured by the degree to which its methods and products become widely used throughout the sector, and improve the lives of people affected by disasters. To achieve this, ownership of Sphere’s standards has to be taken up by the widest range of humanitarian actors possible, both institutions and individuals.

In short, Sphere needs to continue to transform itself from a project into the core of civil society. This cannot happen overnight; facilitating this transition will continue to be Sphere’s central aim over the coming years, and forms the basis for the priorities outlined in this Strategic Plan.

**Operating Context**

By far the most significant feature of the future context in which Sphere will be operating is that humanitarian emergencies are on the increase, due to conflict and natural events – in many cases, a combination of both. Shrinking humanitarian space and militarization of humanitarian response are factors that have a growing influence on the humanitarian sector. Climate change, a significant challenge in the early 21st century, will have both a direct impact, through more frequent extreme weather events, and indirect effects, such as mass migration, including to urban areas, more vulnerable populations, and resource conflicts.

The unhappy reality is that the need for quality humanitarian response as promoted by Sphere is on the increase. The capacity of the NGO sector to keep pace is likely to be constrained by lack of resources, and the quality of the overall response is likely to be further compromised by the entry of inexperienced new actors in the field.

The complexion of the disaster response sector is changing. Donor governments, for various political and economic arguments, are favouring the delivery of aid through a new set of actors. For some, such as armies and commercial contractors, the humanitarian imperative is not paramount. For others, such as UN agencies, their ways of working have often proved a
challenge to their operationalization of quality and accountability as promoted by Sphere.

Though Sphere has traditionally focussed its attention, in terms of training and dissemination, on staff from NGOs, that sector is also not without its difficulties. The high turnover of staff among humanitarian NGOs has made it difficult to guarantee that Sphere training is consolidated into institutional practice. The “critical mass” of a sufficient number of humanitarian workers competent in Sphere being available to circulate between different agencies in the sector is far from being reached.

The difficulty is compounded by the varying levels of commitment by NGO leaders to the maintenance of quality and accountability standards, resulting in limited mechanisms for ensuring that competent individuals spread their experience, and new recruits receiving limited Sphere induction as a matter of course.

On the positive side, the sector as a whole is conscious of the need for professionalism and there are a number of inter-agency initiatives which, taken together, are formidable allies to Sphere’s mission. Prominent among these are the Emergency Capacity Building project (ECB), the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), People in Aid (PiA), the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) and Coordination Sud. Many national NGO platforms, such as the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) in (UK), Aktion Deutschland Hilfte (ADH) (Germany) and InterAction (USA), use Sphere as a point of reference for their internal standards.

In addition, recognising that standards in other sectors have emerged in response to new demands from the field and to new developments in the humanitarian sector, the potential to establish ‘companion standards’ has been created for sectors not already included within the Sphere Handbook, or for an already-addressed cross-cutting issue where there are significant new developments.

The above context presents a series of challenges and opportunities which Sphere has to embrace as it continues to promote quality and accountability in humanitarian response.
Playing to Sphere’s strengths
Sphere has earned itself a position of considerable strength within the humanitarian sector. A great deal of this reputation hinges around its core product, the Sphere Handbook. This, and the accompanying training in its use, will remain the principle vehicle for promoting the adoption of Sphere.

Sphere will remain:

- a practical tool of use in the field
- accessible and open to all who wish to use it
- an integrated concept that unites the charter and the standards
- grounded in the ethics of human rights
- a force for cooperation and cohesion in the sector

Sphere will aim to become:

- a practical tool used by disaster affected populations to claim their legitimate rights and entitlements
- a large active network of partners and agencies from around the world, unified by a commitment to Sphere
- a force for innovation in upholding “the right of affected populations to a life with dignity”

Strategic Priorities
To strengthen the capacity of the humanitarian sector to adopt Sphere as its collective heritage and maintain the momentum of increasing quality and accountability to people affected by disasters, over the period of this Strategy, Sphere will:

1. Strengthen the capacities (people and tools) of the sector to adopt Sphere more widely -
   - Continue to strengthen and improve the Sphere Handbook as the fundamental resource for disaster preparedness and response for humanitarian agencies subscribing to Sphere.
   - Develop guidance and a range of tools on how to help agencies to monitor the extent to which they conform to Sphere, including assessment of impact.
- Continue to develop the capacity of partners to **implement Sphere in practice** by deploying field staff and producing a limited set of “how-to” materials where needed.

- Actively cultivate a **cadre of people** across the world who are advocates, trainers, publicists, champions, and resource people for Sphere.

- **Diversify training** and capacity building to encompass a wider set of learning styles and context.

- Develop guidance and tools to help agencies to conduct outreach at the community level on Sphere, and people’s rights and entitlements.

2. Nurture the political will (among leaders and donors) to support the wide application of Sphere -

   - **Influence institutions**, particularly those with a global reach, whose behaviour affects the well-being of disaster affected people, targeting them with lessons from field experience.

   - Research and disseminate the **evidence base** that Sphere works in practice, with counter-examples of what happens when it is not applied.

   - Produce guidance on how to **influence national and local policies** and practices in support of Sphere and disaster affected populations.

3. Make common cause with allies who can help achieve Sphere’s vision -

   - Increase **local ownership** of Sphere particularly in southern countries through effective use of networks and contacts.

   - Engage with **other quality and accountability initiatives** with a view to embedding Sphere within their guidelines and certifications systems.

   - Promote **companion standards** relationships within other sectors.

   - Introduce Sphere to **new influential audiences and constituencies**, such as those engaged in climate change and the environment.

The Sphere Project
December 2009