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Using the Sphere Standards in Urban Settings - Guidance for humanitarian practitioners

The Sphere Project

Recognising the need to respond to calls from within the humanitarian sector to review existing standards with regard to their relevance for urban response, the Sphere Project is developing a Sphere guide for urban response.

Timeframe: 2016 - 2018

Latest update on 4 June 2016: The sphere guide is currently being piloted until April 2016. You can request a copy via email to tools@sphereproject.org

Background

Over the past five years, a variety of humanitarian crises has highlighted a lack of clear understanding of how a diverse community of actors may respond most effectively in urban environments. From the Haiti earthquake and cholera response, to forced displacement in and around Nairobi, to mixed refugee and internal displacement around the Syria crisis, and Typhoon Haiyan, a growing number of Sphere practitioners are requesting guidance on how to contextualize Sphere Standards for urban operations.

There is little consensus or convergence within the humanitarian community on what constitutes clear best practice, in part because of the need to consider urban slums, peri-urban areas, degree of functioning governance and baseline economic profiles among other variables.

Unregulated and poorly planned rapid urbanisation has increased the exposure and vulnerability of urban populations to both natural disasters and complex emergencies. Some actors have called for new strategies and tools for sectoral response; others are calling for better adaptation of proven approaches to new contexts.

While there are a number of initiatives underway for specific agencies, the IASC, some clusters, and regional bodies to review their own approach to urban contexts, Sphere is seeking to develop light guidance to support the use of the Sphere Handbook in a variety of urban situations in an integrated way, including implications for the Humanitarian Charter, Protection Principles, Core Humanitarian Standard (replacing the Sphere Core Standards), and technical chapters in such operations. In addition, this review will highlight current gap areas or areas of emerging agreement on urban response which will inform the next framework to review the Sphere Handbook (2016-2018).

The Sphere Handbook is a reflection of commonly agreed best practice in humanitarian response. At the time of the last Handbook revision (2009-10) this agreement did not yet exist for urban response and therefore the urban operating context is only marginally included in the current version. Recognising the need to respond to calls from within the humanitarian sector to review existing standards with regard to their relevance for urban response, the Sphere Project is developing a Sphere guide for urban response.

Purpose

The development of this guide is driven by two realisations: that humanitarian response in urban situations is substantially different from rural situations; and that the number and scale of urban humanitarian responses will continue to grow as more of the world's population move to towns and cities. Applying global standards in urban situations has been a challenge for a long time. In the run-up to the next Handbook revision, Sphere is looking into the topic, to provide guidance and to understand how best to integrate the urban approach in the next Handbook. This document looks specifically at understanding how Sphere may be contextualised to use in urban responses.

Content

The guide has two parts, both of which deal with contextualisation of global standards to urban situations:

- A narrative with numerous case studies exploring various urban contexts and ways to adapt global standards.
- A checklist guiding practitioners in their choice of standards and adaptation of the supporting indicators and actions.

The Consultant was supported by a very strong advisory group made up of experienced urban practitioners who provided the majority of the case studies.

Intended audience

The primary audiences for Sphere for Urban Responses are those working in humanitarian needs assessment, Programme design and the management of humanitarian response. It may also be useful for a wider range of staff, including staff in government agencies in urban areas who find themselves confronted with a humanitarian crisis – and humanitarians – for the first time.

Testing process

This is a pilot draft of using the Sphere Standards in urban settings which will be revised in the light of comments and testing in the field. It is being piloted until the end of April 2016.

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