

# The Sphere Project Guidelines

The Sphere Project guidelines consist of a Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response that are presented in a book format aimed to assist humanitarian relief workers in delivering high-quality and accountable disaster response. The initiative was launched in 1997 through an international collaboration that includes the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement. The collaboration currently consists of over 400 organisations in over 80 countries which have all adopted the Sphere consensus, including donor organisations which now request that emergency funding proposals be written in the context of the Sphere Guidelines. The identified Minimum Standards to be attained in disaster assistance are grouped in five key sectors:

- 1) Common Standards to All Sectors (project management)
- 2) Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion
- 3) Food Security, Nutrition and Food Aid
- 4) Shelter, Settlement and Non-Food Items
- 5) Health Services

The combination of food production with food distribution is clearly advocated in The Sphere Project guidelines, which is a handbook designed for use in disaster response but has an equal role in disaster preparedness and broader disaster risk reduction programmes. It is applicable in a range of scenarios, including natural disasters as well as armed conflict in both slow-onset and rapid-onset situations. This includes urban refugee situations as a result of armed conflict (Liberia, Sierra Leone) and urban disasters that may have resulted from tsunamis, earthquakes or tropical storms, as have recently occurred in urban areas of India, Indonesia, China and Pakistan. The Sphere Handbook 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” (page 5). Such core beliefs are of great relevance to urban agriculture as the Sphere Handbook strongly endorses small-scale agricultural interventions, which bring not only increased localised food security and fresh nutritional inputs but also dignity and psychological support through the mobilisation of human resources among those who may be suffering from post-traumatic stress following an extreme event.

The Sphere Handbook provides appropriate guidance for agricultural interventions in a range of the key sectors from food security to physical planning of settlements. For example, the minimum requirement of surface area per person in a planned settlement is 45 m<sup>2</sup>, so a camp for 1000 refugees would have to be 4.5 hectares. This includes space for household plots, roads, footpaths, sanitation, and other infrastructural inputs, but moreover it also allows for “limited kitchen gardens for individual households” (page 217). On a 4.5 hectare site and using an average household plot size of six

people, this would result in the implementation of 166 small kitchen gardens. The Minimum Standards in Food Security, Nutrition and Food Aid provide the bulk of practical guidance for practical agricultural interventions with key aspects being addressed in Food security standard 1: general food security (page 120) and Food security standard 2: primary production (page 124). For example, primary production mechanisms should be protected and supported, through local capacity building measures and where appropriate with the distribution of seeds, tools, fertilisers, livestock, fishing equipment, hunting implements, credit and loan facilities, market information, transport facilities, etc. Important guidance notes are also provided on the viability of primary production, technological development, improving choice, timeliness and acceptability of primary production, seeds, local purchase of inputs, monitoring usage and unforeseen or negative effects of inputs. The guidance notes also address complexity issues to ensure programmes are well designed, appropriate to local conditions and sustainable.

The Sphere Handbook highlights that “although food distribution is the most common response to acute food insecurity in disasters, other types of response may also help people meet their immediate food needs” (page 121). Thus in urban areas a priority may be the reestablishment of normal market conditions, but equally important are small kitchen gardens and primary production methods: “Such strategies may be more appropriate than food distribution because they uphold dignity, support livelihoods and thereby reduce future vulnerability” (page 121). Thus, in conclusion, the choice of food relief strategy must be made to suit the conditions on the ground rather than external factors such as donor influence, NGO technical expertise or lack of access to basic, appropriate food aid. Food distribution must be planned in conjunction with food-producing options so that transitions from food dependency to food security can be made at the earliest opportunity and with minimum risk to the beneficiaries the food distribution supposedly serves.

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#### Website

<http://www.sphereproject.org/>

(Full book can be downloaded in English, French, Spanish, Arabic and Russian; abstracts are also provided in other languages).



*Stacking column with plastic water bottles containing compost and a plant inside*

Photo: A. Adam-Bradford