MAILMAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
Columbia University

Center for Global Health and Economic Development
Program on Forced Migration and Health

The Sphere Project Evaluation Report

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ACRONYMS

AAH	Aktion Afrika Hilfe
ACDI	Agencia Canadiense de Desarrollo Internacional
ACF	Action Contre la Faim
ACHAU	ACHAU- Humanitarian Action Angola United
ACT	Action by Churches Together
ACORD	Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development
ADRA	Adventist Development and Relief Agency
ALNAP	Active Learning Network on Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
AMDD	Averting Maternal Death and Disability
ARC	American Refugee Committee
BBC	Burmese Border Consortium
BUSPH	Boston University School of Public Health
CAFOD	Catholic Agency for Overseas Development
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CEDPA	Center for Development & Population Activities
CISP	Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli
COC	Code of Conduct
CORD	Churches Action through Relief and Development
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office
FOG	OFDA's Field Operation Guidelines
ICHAP	India-Canada Collaborative HIV/AIDS Project
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
IDP	Internally Displaced Person

IFRC	International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IMC	International Medical Corps
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IOCC	International Orthodox Christian Charities
LNGO	Local Non-Governmental Organization
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NCC	National Council of Churches
NCM	Nazarene Compassionate Ministries International
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OFDA	Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID)
PIA	People in Aid
PSF	Pharmaciens Sans Frontières
PVO	Private Volunteer Organization
SCHR	Steering Committee on Humanitarian Response
SEESAC	Southeastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons
SIDA	Swedish Int'l Development Agency
TCRS	Tanganyikan Churches Refugee Services
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
URD	Le Groupe Urgence – Rehabilitation Developpement
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VOICE	Volunteer Organizations in Cooperation in Emergencies
WCC	World Council of Churches
WCRWC	Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children
WHO	World Health Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The goal of the Sphere Project is "to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance, and to make humanitarian agencies more accountable." Since its launch in 1997 it has become an important influence on the practice of emergency relief in a wide variety of disaster settings. Sphere was developed by a group of non-governmental organizations, partly in response to criticism leveled at the humanitarian community in the wake of their response to the crisis that followed the Rwandan genocide of 1994. At the core of the Project is a Handbook, the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response.

The content of the Handbook is based on two core beliefs: "first, that all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering that arises out of conflict and calamity, and second, that those affected by a disaster have a right to life with dignity and therefore a right to assistance." The articulation of this 'rights-based approach' represents an important revision of the traditional basis of relief. The Sphere Project sees high-quality humanitarian assistance as an obligation, not an act of kindness. It asserts that only assistance that allows those affected by disasters to re-establish a "life with dignity" is acceptable; good-hearted generosity and charitable contributions may be necessary, but they are not necessarily sufficient. In this regard, the Humanitarian Charter, the first part of the Handbook, "defines the legal responsibilities of states and parties to guarantee the right to assistance and protection." It is based on tenets of international law drawn from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Humanitarian Law, and the Convention of the Status of Refugees (1951) among others. The Minimum Standards, the second part of the Handbook, are an attempt to quantify, in specific areas of work (water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter and site planning, and health services), what it necessary in order to satisfy the legal obligations laid out in the Charter. It does this by articulating standards that need to be achieved, and by providing measurable indicators of the achievement of those standards. The Sphere Project is not all-inclusive – it omits important areas of relief work, and it does not purport to be an effort that can satisfy all of the needs of disaster-affected populations.

From September 2002 through September 2003 an evaluation of the Sphere Project was conducted. Its objectives were:

- *to understand whether or not the Sphere Project has made a difference to the quality of humanitarian aid, and ultimately to the lives of those affected by disasters;*
- *to interpret the Sphere Project's success in providing a common framework for humanitarian assistance;*
- *to understand the process by which agencies have incorporated the Sphere Project;*
- *to review the way in which the Sphere Project was created, implemented, and carried out, with a view to learning lessons for future activities.*

In order to gather data relevant to these objectives, four methods were developed. A literature search identified relevant documents that discussed the Sphere Project or subjects closely associated with it underlying principles (accountability, standards development). A questionnaire was widely distributed throughout the humanitarian assistance 'community'. More than 550 responses were obtained and carefully analyzed. In-depth interviews were conducted with more than eighty key informants. Finally, two cases studies, in Tanzania, and Angola, were

conducted in order to get a closer look at how the Sphere Project was being implemented in emergency and post-emergency settings.

The conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation are as follows:

1. The Sphere Project is perceived to be an important and positive influence on the practice of contemporary humanitarian assistance. Although, for reasons explained in the body of the report, the evaluation was unable to determine directly its impact on the quality of humanitarian assistance to disaster-affected populations, it is clear that there is a widespread perception that it has had a beneficial effect.
2. The development of the Handbook, a frequently visited site on the worldwide web, and the many references to the Sphere Project in the 'gray' and published literature, have made it easy to access and very well-known among NGOs, UN agencies, bilateral donors, and others.
3. The adoption of the rights-based approach has been a major influence on the thinking and the operations of many NGOs and other humanitarian agencies.

However, the evaluation also identified a number of problems that could be corrected as the Project moves into its next phase.

1. The "rights-based approach", the cornerstone of the Sphere Project's philosophical approach to humanitarian assistance, is not as well-understood as the more technical aspects presented in the Handbook. The Sphere Project has developed an impressive array of training programs, and many survey respondents reported fully understanding the underlying concepts of the Project only after attending one or another of the training courses. While this attests to the positive effects of the training, it is clear that most humanitarian practitioners will not be able to attend a course in person. Accordingly, other methods of presenting the "rights-based approach" need to be developed. Supervised distance learning methods, whether by instructional CD-ROMs or web-based approaches should be considered. Perhaps better still, given its wide distribution and popularity, an analysis of the Handbook might reveal areas in which it could be strengthened in order to provide better and more convincing information to the reader.

2. Following on the findings cited above, it is clear that the Sphere Project has taken an important first step towards establishing the centrality of human rights in the field of emergency relief. In order to take the next step, the Management Committee should host a meeting to engage all of those involved, i.e., both international and local NGOs, UN agencies, donors, and others, to discuss the contemporary relevance of the 'rights-based approach' and to define the stance of each member of the humanitarian community in regard to it. Although a recent revision of the Handbook has been completed, a decision of the Management Committee was to not re-visit the Humanitarian Charter as part of the revision process. An inclusive process such as the one suggested here might allow for the development of a consensus as to what a new, revised, contemporary Humanitarian Charter might be.

3. There is widespread confusion regarding the terminology used in the Sphere Project Handbook, specifically in regard to the terms "standards" and "indicators". These are

consistently misused and misinterpreted, and this confusion may, in fact, be the basis for oft-stated objections to the Sphere Project. While some of this problem may have been addressed in the revised Handbook, the Management Committee should take steps to be consistent in its use of these terms, and all future written and electronic communications from the Project should be explicit in their definition and use of these terms.

4. Knowledge of the Sphere Project is not uniformly distributed throughout the humanitarian community. Employees of international NGOs are better informed than those of local NGOs, international personnel of INGOs are better informed that local staff, and those working at headquarters or at other more central locations are more aware of Sphere than those working at project sites. To a certain extent, the Project is characterized by a 'top-down' approach. Although the Project has been working to alleviate this problem, innovative and determined methods should be developed to engage all humanitarians to a much greater degree in the implementation of the Sphere Project where it is most important – at the place where those affected by disaster are being assisted.

5. The nature of complex emergencies has changes somewhat over the last ten years. Previously characterized by refugee crises in tropical countries, more recent emergencies have involved large numbers of internally displaced or non-displaced conflict-affected populations in both tropical and more temperate settings. While the standards promulgated by the Sphere Project may be universal, the specific indicators used to determine attainment of those standards need adjustment on an emergency-specific basis. If possible, the Sphere Project should provide guidance as to what factors should be considered in any circumstance in order to attain the Standards, instead of giving specific indicators, based on a single emergency paradigm.

6. The relationship between emergency-affected and surrounding populations has always been a tenuous one. In areas where application of Sphere standards would create differences in the standards of living between these populations explicit attention needs to be paid to this problem. The Sphere Project should develop guidelines for how to address this issue.

7. Most respondents to the survey cited a lack of funds as the principal reason why Sphere standards could not be achieved. The Sphere Project should work closely with the new initiative on good humanitarian donorship to focus attention on this problem and to work towards its satisfactory resolution. The relationship between NGOs and donors in the area of humanitarian assistance needs to be further defined.

In conclusion, this evaluation has not revealed any surprises. The influence of the Sphere Project in the realm of humanitarian assistance was found to be positive and widespread. The Project Management Committee, all those who have worked on the Handbook, and especially those who have contributed to the implementation of the Project in the field are to be congratulated. A number of areas were found where the Project could be improved. Doing so would strengthen the already important contribution that the Sphere Project has made to humanitarian assistance and would be of great benefit to those whose lives are unfortunately affected by man-made or natural disaster.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

The Sphere Project was initiated in 1996 by a group of individuals and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to the provision of humanitarian assistance to refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), populations affected by conflict, and those affected by natural or man-made disasters. Its goal is "to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance, and to make humanitarian agencies more accountable." (Sphere Project, 2000:1)

Although there were many streams of thought that led to the development of what is today the Sphere Project, to many people Sphere is the largest and best-known response of non-governmental organizations to the criticism leveled at the nature and the quality of humanitarian assistance provided in the wake of the Rwandan genocide of 1994. A multi-donor evaluation of the response to that complex emergency found that:

> *"[M]ore attention to needs and capacities assessments, contingency planning, preparedness measures, and adoption of the most cost–effective interventions by UN agencies, NGOs and donor governments, including military contingents providing humanitarian assistance, would have resulted in better allocation of relief resources and, more importantly, could have saved even more human lives. One problem regarding such concepts as contingency planning and preparedness measures is lack of consistent working definitions among agencies."* (Eriksson et al, 1996:49)

An important characteristic of the Sphere Project, in respect to the above citation, is that it is a product of the NGOs alone. While the findings of the Rwanda evaluation are directed toward all members of what has come to be called the "humanitarian community", to their credit only the NGOs responded in a cohesive, coordinated way to address the spirit of the criticisms that were leveled at all. Their broad-based response, one in which more than 300 agencies and an equally impressive number of technical experts participated, is embodied in a Handbook entitled Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response.

The content of the Handbook is based on two core beliefs: "First, that all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering that arises out of conflict and calamity, and second, that those affected by a disaster have a right to life with dignity and therefore a right to assistance." (Sphere Project, 2000c:1) The articulation of humanitarian assistance as the fulfillment of the rights of affected populations is perhaps the most daring and challenging idea put forward by the Sphere Project. To many of the framers of the Project, the adoption of a rights-based approach to humanitarian assistance represents a fundamental and drastic revision of the philosophy underlying emergency relief that prevailed prior to 1994. For the Sphere Project, relief is not charity; it is not only the generous outpouring of support from good-hearted individuals and governments that is always welcome, but not always adequate or effective. Instead, the Sphere Project sees international disaster response as an obligation, incurred by those who can help, to ensure that the rights of affected individuals and populations are respected and accorded. In other words, it is a bold and unequivocal assertion that providing relief to those made vulnerable by disaster is more than a good thing to do – it is an implementation of the law.

The Humanitarian Charter, the first part of the Handbook, "defines the legal responsibilities of states and parties to guarantee the right to assistance and protection." (Sphere Project, 2000c:1) The Charter is an attempt to summarize the major legal principles on which the Sphere Project is based. It draws from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Humanitarian Law (the Geneva Conventions), and the Convention on the Status of Refugees of 1951, as well as on other international documents, to establish a legal framework to which it proposes to hold the entire humanitarian community accountable. (For more on the Humanitarian Charter, see below, Section 3).

The Minimum Standards, which constitute the bulk of the Handbook, represent to a certain degree an attempt to quantify, in selected areas of work, what it takes to satisfy the legal obligations laid out in the Humanitarian Charter. Standards, and key indicators of fulfillment of those standards, are offered in the technical areas of water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter and site planning, and health services. Although these do not represent all of the areas in which disaster assistance unfolds, they all feature prominently in most relief efforts. Perhaps more importantly, they are areas for which a broad consensus among NGOs could be reached in regard to definitions, procedures, and indicators.[1] The Sphere Project acknowledges that it omits certain important areas. The physical protection of vulnerable populations, for example, is not explicitly covered. Neither are the technical areas of education and mental health, although these have frequently been proposed for inclusion. An important issue that is thought by many to have been inadequately addressed by the Sphere Project is that of gender. Admirably, during the course of Project implementation, and to a major degree in the revision of the Handbook, Sphere Project management has addressed this initial omission. In summary, the Sphere Project does not purport to be "all things to all people", and it certainly leaves room for other so-called accountability initiatives, including People in Aid, the Humanitarian Accountability Project, Platforme-Qualite, and so on, to fill the gaps it has left.

It must be understood that the Sphere Project is an entirely voluntary effort. NGOs have adopted it to varying degrees – for some, proposal writing, programming, and implementation are done entirely as a function of the principles and specific content of the Project; for others, knowledge of the Project is incomplete and use of it cursory, at best. While the donor organizations we spoke to are all quite familiar with the Sphere Project - and laudatory of it - there are no real rewards for those NGOs who use it more, nor are there specific negative consequences for those who do not use it at all. While some have, at various times, called for the establishment of an NGO regulatory body to monitor organizational performance, or for donors to use demonstrable knowledge of the Sphere Project or some acceptable equivalent as a condition for funding NGO programs, these conditions are unlikely to become the norm. Perhaps it is surprising that a voluntary initiative such as the Sphere Project has had such enormous influence over the field of humanitarian assistance. But, as we reiterate below, for the most part it is a welcome initiative. Its influence has been positive and its existence has helped to change the profession of emergency relief from one steeped in the principles of voluntarism and charity to one that

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[1] Consensus was an important operating principle for those involved in the development of the Humanitarian Charter and the Minimum Standards. It was a conscious decision to include only those points on which consensus was reached, rather than to take strong, but potentially controversial, stances in areas where disagreement on the principles might have resulted in a weakened, or factionalized, NGO community. The idea, one of inclusivity, was to allow as many NGOs as possible to participate in the effort.

includes, as part of its foundation, important elements derived from the disciplines of legal obligation and scientific rigor.

Finally, the Sphere Project remains young. Its full impact cannot yet be measured. In many ways it is a first step down the road of a rapidly changing approach to humanitarian assistance that since the Project's conception has been strongly influenced by humanitarian crises in political contexts as disparate as those in East Timor, Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan and Iraq. While the foundation on which the Sphere Project was based may have shifted, those who use its principles and standards have been able to adapt it to contemporary needs.

This evaluation documents the achievements of the Sphere Project, the important ways in which it has made strides towards the achievement of its stated objectives, and the areas in which it might focus its future efforts as it continues to mature.

B. The Evaluation

From September 2002 through September 2003, a team from the Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University, assisted by colleagues from the Institute of Public Health of Makerere University, Uganda, conducted an extensive evaluation of the Sphere Project at the request of the Sphere Management Committee.

The objectives of the evaluation were:
- *to understand whether or not the Sphere Project has made a difference to the quality of humanitarian aid, and ultimately to the lives of those affected by disasters;*
- *to interpret the Sphere Project's success in providing a common framework for humanitarian assistance. Has Sphere led to improved cooperation in the field?*
- *to understand the process by which agencies have incorporated the Sphere Project, with emphasis on creative tools and approaches;*
- *to review the way in which the Sphere Project was created, implemented and carried out with a view to learning lessons for future activities.*

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Acknowledgements:

The evaluation involved hundreds of individuals. Assistance ranged from volunteering for focus groups, arranging logistics for case studies, being peppered with questions in interviews, receiving phone calls, filling out questionnaires, editing, proof reading, advising, and so forth. We are grateful for every bit of assistance we received.

Please accept our appreciation more specifically:

C. Methods

Four principal methods were used to gather data for the evaluation:

1) Extensive review of the published literature pertaining to the Sphere Project;
2) Semi-structured interviews with a wide variety of respondents;
3) World-wide questionnaire-based survey;
4) Two case studies.

Each method has advantages and disadvantages. The evaluation team found that no single source of data could serve to answer the many questions posed. We did our best to use an appropriate combination of methods to answer each issue raised by the Sphere Management Committee. At times, we relied more heavily on one, while at other times it seemed more appropriate to give higher priority to another. In most instances, the use of one method or the other, and of one bit of data or another, became a question of the team's judgment regarding the relevance and the reliability of the data.

1. Literature Review

Collection of pertinent published literature was undertaken by all the evaluation team members. Although we concentrated on those documents that made direct reference to the Sphere Project, a significant number of articles concern the broader issues of standard setting and accountability. In addition, a number of the papers we reviewed are more directly concerned with humanitarian assistance in general, and make only tangential reference to the Sphere Project. In all, 283 documents were collected, read, and categorized on the basis of their relevance, in our judgment, as either "critical" or "related". Relevant citations are drawn from them and used throughout the evaluation report.

Documents were identified through a variety of means including searches of text-based search and retrieval systems, e.g. PubMed for medical and public health literature, and web-based search engines such as Google. Some of the many key words used for these searches are: Sphere, Humanitarian Charter, code of conduct, standards, accountability, humanitarian aid (and assistance), rights, human rights, international humanitarian law, participatory, quality, protection, disaster, disaster preparedness, protection, guidelines, refugee(s), internally displaced, emergencies, and complex emergencies. In addition, an important source of material was the cited references in each reviewed document. The software package EndNote 6 was used to organize the references.

A number of problems accompany the use of the published literature as a source of data for the evaluation. For one thing, we cannot be sure of the time when any of the documents we collected were actually written; we can only know the date of publication. There could be instances where there is a considerable delay between the two. Secondly, articles published in the 1990s, while relevant at the time of their publication, may no longer retain their importance. As mentioned above, both the context in which the Sphere Project is implemented and the Sphere Project itself have changed during the short time the Project has been implemented. Criticisms that were appropriate in the past may have been addressed; what were innovations years ago may have become impediments to change in the present. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the fact that something has been written and has become part of the body of literature pertaining to a subject does not mean that it is good. To take all of these issues into account required us to exercise considerable judgment, drawing upon our knowledge of the project site programs and data derived from the other methods we employed.

The entire bibliography is presented in Annex 1.

2. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews of individual key informants (and, on occasion, groups of individuals) were conducted throughout the evaluation period. Those conducted toward the beginning helped to guide later discussion and contributed toward the development of the questionnaire. Interviews held toward the end of the evaluation allowed us to further explore questions raised by preceding interviewees, our reading of the literature, preliminary analyses of

the survey results, and comments received from the Evaluation Advisory Group[2] and the Sphere Project Management Committee.

With very few exceptions, the interviews were conducted by two of us (MVD, RW). A few were done by telephone, but most were face-to-face. Interviews were conducted in Washington, D.C., New York City, Paris, Geneva, London, Brussels, Kampala, and during the case studies in Tanzania and Angola. Guidelines were drawn up for each category of interviewee (see Annex 3), but these were basically skeletal and discussions were most often wide-ranging; all information was recorded for possible use in this report. In all cases, interviewers collected the data called for by the guidelines.   We categorized interviewees as representatives of:

- International and local NGOs
- Donors
- Sphere Management Committee members and Sphere Project staff
- United Nations agencies
- Governments hosting refugees or internally displaced persons
- Early contributors to the Sphere Project

Use of the information collected during the interviews is subjective. We tried to elicit different points of view on key subjects, in order to have a representative array that covered the entire spectrum of thinking regarding the Sphere Project.   However, it is difficult to assign levels of credibility to our informants; some may be far more knowledgeable regarding certain aspects of Sphere than others, while some had more involvement with Sphere at a given point in time, and not throughout the implementation of the Project. Perhaps most importantly, interviewees were, for the most part, selected because of their employment by a particular organization or their place in one of the categories listed above; although they were speaking to us in an official capacity, their views are not necessarily representative of their organizations. It is conceivable that were we to have spoken to other individuals or groups of individuals from the same organizations we would have received different information. In order to overcome these unavoidable biases, we exercised our judgment as to how to best use the information to represent the totality of our findings and to strengthen the discussion that constitutes the body of this report.

3. Questionnaire

Because the Sphere Project is well known throughout the world and is being implemented far and wide in both emergency and non-emergency settings, it was important for us to stretch the reach of this evaluation as far beyond the headquarters of donors, UN agencies, and international NGOs as possible. In order to give voice to all perspectives on the Sphere Project, from the implementation level up, from as many countries as possible and from as many different settings as possible, we decided that a survey using a widely distributed questionnaire would be best. In addition, casting the net as wide as possible to discover ways in which Sphere was viewed, discussed, and used, had the potential advantage of ensuring that the evaluation would not be

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[2] The Evaluation Advisory Group followed this year-long evaluation closely. Three coordination meetings were held during which the evaluation methods were reviewed and recommendations were made to the evaluators.   A complete list of the Evaluation Advisory Group members can be found in Annex 2.

overly influenced by the passionately held opinions of a few more accessible individuals or groups.

Nevertheless, a series of problems was inherent in this method and these were recognized from the outset. Probably the most important potential bias is that responses to the survey were not necessarily representative of the humanitarian assistance community. No attempt to select a representative sample was made – the respondents were self-selected. Individuals who might have been more familiar with the Sphere Project, or those who had stronger views regarding the Sphere Project, may have been more likely to complete the questionnaire, although all those with experience in humanitarian work were urged to do so, including those who had not previously heard of the Project.

As a result of this important bias, many of the questions in the survey were designed to elicit the most objective responses possible. For example, responses to the request for a description of how Sphere is used in the respondent's work provided valuable information. In addition, the unsolicited comments provided by respondents working in all areas of humanitarian assistance and in many different countries provided crucial insight to the levels of understanding of the goals of the Sphere Project and to how the content of the Handbook is translated into practice at the project implementation level.

Although we were satisfied with the number of responses we received, we are certain that far more people knew about the survey than responded to it. Unfortunately, there is no way to ascertain the size of this group or the response rate. Similarly, there is no way to know the reasons for non-response – whether it reflects sympathy or antipathy to the Sphere Project, a general apathy toward the Project or towards surveys in general, the competing pressures for potential respondents' time, or other reasons.

Questionnaire design

The questionnaire was designed to elicit both the opinions of humanitarian workers regarding the Sphere Project and their experiences using it. All of the questions related directly to the objectives of the evaluation. A first draft was prepared in New York and pre-tested in New York, Paris, Geneva, and Afghanistan. The questionnaire was also presented to the Sphere Project Evaluation Advisory Group, the Sphere Project Management Committee, and the Sphere Project Manager. After receiving and incorporating substantial comments from the pretesting and the review by the above groups, the questionnaire was finalized and translated from English to Spanish and French and back by professional translators who had been trained in the United Nations system.

The complete questionnaire is found in Annex 4a (English), 4b (French) and 4c (Spanish). It is divided into sections. Section 1 requests general background information of the respondent, including name (optional), age, and country of current employment. Section 2 was completed by those who reported having at least a basic understanding of the purpose and the content of the Sphere Project. Section 3 was intended for those who had never heard of the Sphere Project or who had a limited understanding of what it was. Although the questions in these two sections were similar, those in Section 2 were intended to link experiences in humanitarian work more

directly to the Sphere Project. A fourth section of the questionnaire asked for opinions regarding perceived changes in the nature of humanitarian assistance from the time the respondent began working in the field and for an estimation of the role that the Sphere Project had played in bringing about those changes.

Questionnaire distribution

The questionnaire was distributed via the World Wide Web, as an electronic attachment to e-mail correspondence, and in a paper version. We expected the vast majority of responses to be submitted over the web, but we recognize that there are considerable limitations to this technology. Most importantly, access to the internet in developing countries (where most emergencies occur) remains limited; the security of connection to the internet makes downloading and submission of the questionnaire more difficult and the speed of transmission may also cause problems. Simple problems of access may have discouraged some potential respondents.

The electronic attachment was designed to reach those with access to e-mail, but not to the World Wide Web or those with only intermittent access to the web. The questionnaire was attached as a Microsoft Word document that could be downloaded, printed, completed, and mailed back to Columbia University. Paper versions of the questionnaire were distributed during visits to various organizations and during the interviews and case study processes, as well as to anyone who requested it.

The questionnaire was widely distributed throughout the international humanitarian community. More than 750 individual e-mails were sent to more that 160 international and national NGOs. Recipients were urged to pass on information regarding the survey to friends and colleagues. Announcements were made at many local and international meetings and conferences. In addition, publicity regarding the survey was made on the following web sites and list serves, among others:

- Aid Workers Network: forum.aidworkers.net
- International Council of Volunteer Agencies: www.icva.ch
- Forced Migration Online: www.forcedmigration.org
- OneWorld.net (e-mail to 16,000 people)
- Relief Web: www.reliefweb.net
- Overseas Development Institute: www.odihpn.org
- Development Opportunities: www.dev-zone.org
- Sphere Project (e-mail to 3,500 recipients)
- InterAction (e-mail to 400 recipients)
- Humanitarian Times (e-mailed to 20,000 recipients)
- Reuters AlertNet: www.alertnet.org
- ALNAP
- VOICE: www.ngovoice.org

Finally, a small note card was produced that was mailed to individuals, placed on display tables at appropriate conferences, and personally handed to people as the evaluators attended meetings, conferences, and other public events (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Questionnaire Announcement Card

A team from the Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University and Makerere University, are conducting an evaluation of the impact the Sphere Project has had on the quality of humanitarian assistance. Part of this evaluation is a survey of humanitarian workers. We encourage anyone who has worked in humanitarian aid in any capacity to complete it.

YOUR OPINION IS IMPORTANT!

To complete this questionnaire on-line please go to:

http://www.sphere-eval.hs.columbia.edu

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MAKERERE UNIVERSITY

Available in English, Spanish and French

Description of Survey Respondents

We received 581 responses to the survey, consistent with our initial estimates. Although this obviously represents only a small proportion of those people who might have completed the questionnaire, we are confident that all efforts were made to distribute it widely and to strongly encourage responses. Given the length of the questionnaire and the time commitment required to complete it, the conditions under which many potential respondents work, and the generally low response to unsolicited requests for survey participation, we were satisfied with the number of responses. As expected, the majority of questionnaires (422, 72.6%) were submitted through the World Wide Web, with 59 (10.2%) coming as an e-mail attachment and 35 (6.0%) via land mail. Sixty-six (66, 11.4%) were administered by an on-site surveyor. Responses were received from more than 90 countries and almost 200 different humanitarian agencies (see Annexes 5 and 6). Most respondents (516, 88.8%) completed the English version of the questionnaire, with 47 (8.1%) and 18 (3.1%) completing the Spanish and French versions, respectively.

Figure 2: Age of Questionnaire Respondents
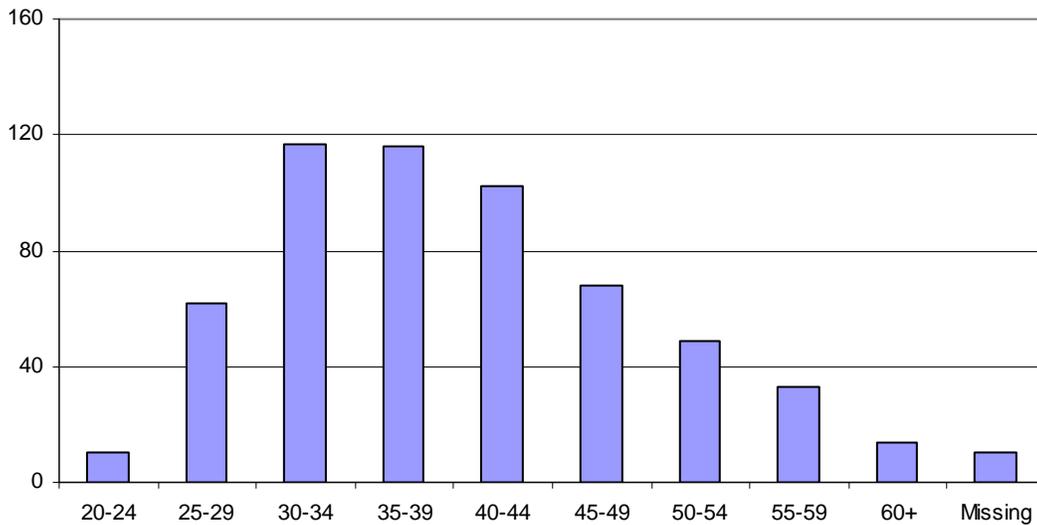
Three hundred sixty-six (366, 63.0%) of respondents were male and 208 (35.8%) were female. Most (335, 57.7%) were between 30 and 44 years old, with 72 (12.4%) below 30 years, and 164 (28.2%) older than forty-five years (Figure 2). The majority (503, 86.6%) were working in humanitarian assistance at the time they completed the questionnaire. Most respondents had considerable experience in humanitarian assistance. Three hundred fifty (350, 60.2%) reported having worked at the project implementation level for more than five years. (Figure 3)

Figure 3: Number of years survey respondents have worked in humanitarian assistance
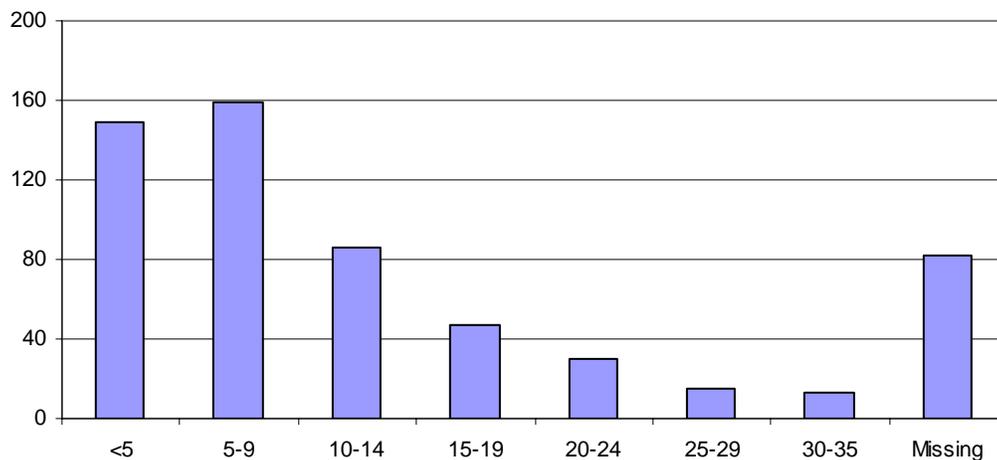
Respondents are now working or had worked in every technical area addressed by the Sphere Project Handbook (Figure 4). In addition, respondents worked in other areas including education, logistics, grants management, and camp administration. Smaller numbers of respondents worked in telecommunications, agriculture, microenterprise, and security. This wide range of disciplines

was not surprising, as the standards presented in the Handbook are cross-cutting in nature and can be applied widely.

Figure 4: Technical Areas in which Survey Respondents have Worked
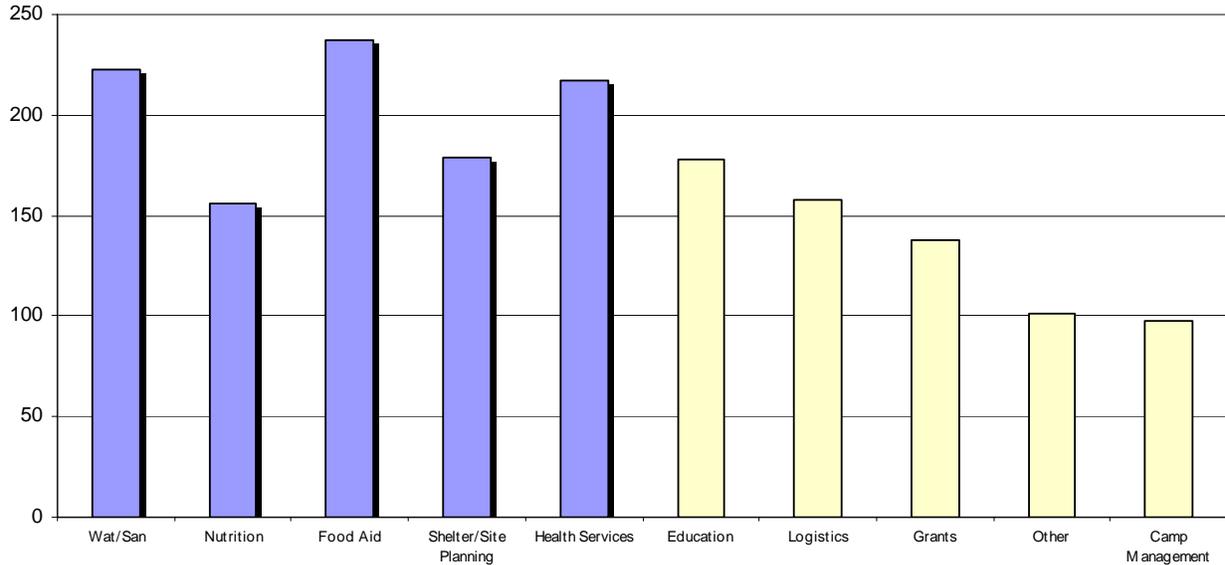
Because our interest in standards extends over and beyond those specific to the Sphere Project, we requested that people unfamiliar with the Sphere Project complete the questionnaire. Ninety-eight (98, 17%) respondents met this criterion. Of the remaining 483 (83.1%) respondents who were familiar with the Sphere Project, 237 (40.8%) reported understanding the Project "very well", 197 (33.9%), had a "basic understanding" and 49 (8.4%) of those who had heard of the Sphere Project understood "not very much" about it. In all, 434 respondents completed Section 2 of the questionnaire and 147 completed Section 3.

Although it was important to distinguish between international and local staff, we felt that to allow respondents to classify themselves as one or the other might create confusion. Accordingly, we asked respondents their nationality. If they were currently working in the country of their citizenship, and if that country was an aid recipient, we classified them as local staff. One hundred eight-five (185, 31.8%) of respondents met these criteria and 289 (49.7%) were classified as international staff. Because of their failure to provide their nationality or the country they are currently working in, 107 (18.5%) of respondents could not be assigned to either category.

**Figure 5: Current Working Base of
Questionnaire Respondents**
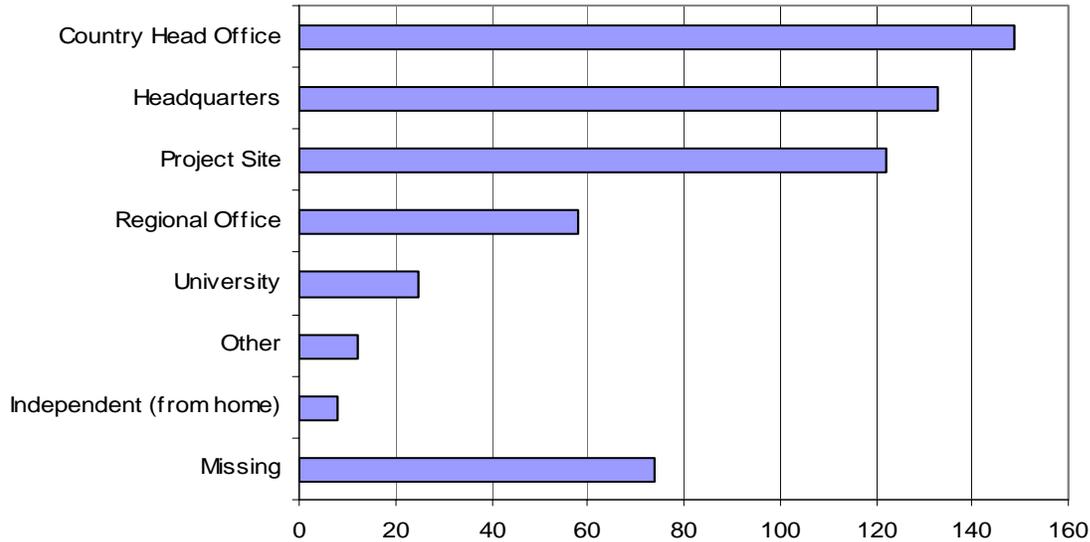
Finally, we also sought to determine at which level of the international humanitarian assistance system respondents were currently working. More than half (340, 58.5%) worked at either headquarters level, in a regional office, or in a country head office. One hundred twenty-two (122, 21.0%) worked at the project site (the most peripheral level) of their organization. (45, 7.7%). A few respondents identified themselves as independent, university-affiliated, or in another category; some (74, 12.7%) submitted missing or blank responses. (Figure 5)

4. Case studies

Case studies were conducted in Tanzania (May 2003) and Angola (July 2003).

In Tanzania, the study was based in five refugee camps. The camps were selected on the basis of accessibility, the presence of a Sphere Project pilot agency[3], and the ability to interview a cross-section of refugees of different nationalities. The methods used included observation, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. The study population consisted of donor agencies, government agencies, project coordinators of local NGOs, project coordinators of international NGOs and, most importantly, refugees. In all, fifteen (15) focus group discussions were held (six with Congolese refugees and nine with Burundian refugees), fifteen (15) key informants were interviewed, and thirty-five (35) questionnaires were administered.

The Angola case study focused on three locations: Luanda, Huambo, and Kuito. Sites were selected on the basis of the presence of a Sphere Project pilot agency, UN agencies, and both international and local NGOs. Forty (40) interviews were conducted following guidelines that

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[3] A pilot agency is a service organization that serves as a tentative model for future development, institutionalization of standards, and identification of the most effective methodologies for incorporating standards into activities at project sites.

had been established prior to arrival in Angola and adapted to meet local conditions. Logistical problems hampered our ability to conduct this case study in the same manner as the Tanzania case study because our Ugandan partners were unable to participate due to of difficulties in obtaining visas. Their role in this case study was to have included conducting the focus group discussions with the affected population. Despite attempts to replace them, we were unable to hire experienced personnel in Angola, which prevented us from conducting focus groups with the local population.

Full reports of the case studies are appended in Annex 7 (Tanzania) and Annex 8 (Angola).

D. Comments on Methods

Although a few observations regarding the methods used to undertake this evaluation are given in the appropriate sections above, some more general comments might be useful to allow the reader to place the evaluation results, and especially the conclusions and recommendations, in proper perspective.

The most fundamental objective of this evaluation was to determine whether or not the Sphere Project has had a beneficial influence on the quality of humanitarian assistance. In order to do so, one would want to have some basis for comparison. As the evaluation progressed we found it impossible to establish a baseline level for a variety of reasons. For one thing, each emergency setting to which the Sphere Project might have applied, through the use of the Humanitarian Charter and the standards and indicators presented in the Handbook, has its own characteristics. Complex emergencies differ from natural disasters; disasters in tropical climates cannot be compared to those in cold-weather countries. The array of actors, especially the NGOs, is different in each setting and, importantly, the level of per capita spending on the relief effort varies enormously and has a major impact on what can be achieved. Of course, there are also many other factors that cannot be adequately controlled in order to make a "before and after" comparison convincing.

Furthermore, the ideal way to determine whether a relief operation has been of acceptable (or of improved) quality is to ask those for whom the benefit is intended. We were able to interact with refugees only during the Tanzania case study. Operational difficulties in Angola restricted our activities there to discussions with NGOs and government personnel. Our initial plans had been to conduct a third case study, but financial and temporal constraints precluded us from doing so. In addition, the populations who potentially benefit from the Sphere Project are not necessarily knowledgeable of what their state might have been in the absence of the Sphere Project. Furthermore, if our experience in Tanzania can serve as a guide, they can often be more concerned with their immediate needs. Finally, although one can interview refugees to determine their knowledge of rights, entitlements, benefits, and so forth, issues of representativeness might hamper the ability to draw definite conclusions.

For all of the above reasons, the evaluation focused on information gathered from the providers of assistance, rather than the recipients. As pointed out, it was impossible to determine the degree to which authors of published or "gray" literature, interviewees, or survey respondents

present views that are representative of the humanitarian community as a whole. In many cases, the determinations of who to speak to, how much weight to accord any individual article or interview, and which analyses of the survey results to perform were decisions made by the investigators. The principal investigators (MVD,RW) for the evaluation have, between them, decades of experience in complex emergencies, from the policy-making level to the most peripheral project implementation level. They have worked in complex emergencies in Africa, Europe, and Asia. They have worked for government agencies, United Nations agencies, and non-governmental organizations. The Sphere Project Evaluation Advisory Group has suggested that the evaluation report utilize their combined experience, highlighting their perspectives on the data and on the Sphere Project overall. Accordingly, the data presented and its analysis are inevitably colored, albeit as minimally as possible, by their opinions.

A final caution in interpreting this evaluation is in order. The Sphere Project is largely a product of a generalized "stock-taking" that took place in the humanitarian community in the mid-1990s. In the wake of the failed post-Rwanda genocide emergency relief effort in Goma, a number of projects aimed at increasing the level of accountability of the humanitarian community have their roots in this period, when both UN agencies and NGOs were re-thinking policies and programming processes. The Sphere Project is by no means the only influence on changes in the quality of humanitarian assistance over the past seven to ten years. Perhaps the most difficult challenge to the evaluation team was to attribute characteristics of humanitarian assistance, as perceived by those who participated in the evaluation, to the Sphere Project alone. We tried to be as specific as possible with our questions and in all data collection activities, limiting responses to reflect only the role of the Sphere Project. Nevertheless, this was not possible in all cases. Inevitably, the conclusions of this evaluation reflect the perceptions of those who participated in it and, inevitably as well, these extend beyond the direct influence of the Sphere Project alone.

Because the Sphere Project is, at least to a degree, an offshoot of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, it seems appropriate to paraphrase that work's comments in regard to evaluations. Evaluations frequently focus on negative findings in an attempt to draw lessons and recommendations for the future. While the main findings and conclusions of this report may seem to some to dwell on the negatives, the positive impact that the Sphere Project has had on the profession of humanitarian assistance in general, and on emergency/disaster relief specifically, cannot be underestimated and should never be ignored. Responses to future complex emergencies, not only by NGOs, but by all those who can be considered members of the wider humanitarian assistance community, should be guided by careful consideration of the principles, content, and implementation experiences of the Sphere Project.

II. THE SPHERE PROJECT: FROM THE DRAWING BOARD TO THE FIELD

A. How the Sphere Project Began

A recently published monograph reviews the origins of the Sphere Project (Buchanan-Smith, 2003). Although this version of the beginnings of Sphere is not entirely consistent with data we obtained from interviews, it is highly compatible. Essentially, what emerges from all accounts is that during the first half of the 1990s, for reasons that are not entirely clear but that include elements of increasing public and donor scrutiny and their own growing dissatisfaction with their performance in crises such as those in Ethiopia and Sudan, NGOs began to seriously discuss the idea of developing a set of common professional standards. Technical manuals in a variety of sectors had already begun to appear, including a series published by MSF, and operational guidelines produced by Oxfam, UNHCR, and OFDA, among others. In addition, a number of initiatives including the influential development of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's Code of Conduct were underway, on both sides of the Atlantic, which had the specific objective of developing standards for NGO performance. Training programs were also being developed to convey to NGO staff both the conceptual underpinnings of humanitarian assistance and appropriate technical approaches to emergency relief. Finally, several bilateral donors had also expressed interest in improving the state of NGO accountability and had suggested that adherence to a common set of standards might be one way of doing so.

There was a general consensus among those interviewed that this perceived pressure from the donors made it more urgent for the NGOs to develop their own set of standards – they preferred to regulate themselves rather than to have regulation imposed. In addition, most agree that the publication of the Rwanda multi-donor evaluation in March 1996 provided additional impetus for the NGOs to act. That evaluation not only strongly urged the development of standards, but went so far as to recommend that a system of NGO accreditation be developed and enforced.

A series of meetings took place between April and September 1996, at which a number of NGOs, UN agencies, and donors continued to promote the need for performance standards and to propose mechanisms by which they might be developed and implemented. Perhaps most noteworthy among these was a presentation of a proposal of the Steering Committee on Humanitarian Response (SCHR) at the InterAction forum in April. The result was a functional merger of the work on standards development that had begun on both sides of the Atlantic -- this gave the 'movement' a more global (but still primarily 'Northern') voice. These culminated in a meeting in late September at which it was recognized that, despite the fact that there were large differences in the approach of different agencies toward humanitarian assistance, collaboration on the development of performance standards was a good idea whose time had come.

Two points are worth emphasizing. The first is the intentional and successful effort to make the standards development process as inclusive as possible. The initial management of the process that was to become Sphere was comprised of representatives from each of the SCHR member agencies (CARE International, Caritas Internationalis, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Lutheran World Federation, Medecins Sans Frontieres International, Oxfam, and Save the Children Alliance, and World Council of Churches). Representatives from InterAction were added in Spring 1996. Subsequently, as the movement evolved, and even as

the development of sector standards was proceeding, representatives of ICVA, VOICE, and ICRC were added to what became the Sphere Management Committee. It should be noted that the process was similar in regard to participation in the elaboration of the technical standards – those who wanted to participate could. There was no attempt to develop standards or management procedures to which others were asked to accede. Rather, the development process itself was intended to be as fully participatory as possible, and the product, the Sphere Project (so christened in mid-1997), was meant to be driven largely by consensus. This proved, in the eyes of all those interviewed, to be an important key to its success.

A second remarkable feature of the Sphere Project that is not usually commented on is the speed at which it evolved. A full-time Project Manager was hired in July 1997, an initial meeting of the sector coordinators responsible for managing technical inputs into the development of the Standards was held in August, and drafts of the technical chapters were ready by February 1998. After a period of public review of this draft, the first Sphere Project Handbook became available in December 1998.

Accompanying the development of the Handbook were two important debates that went to the heart of the Project. The first involved the degree of accountability in regard to adherence of the standards to which agencies would be held. Some felt that, as suggested by the Rwanda multi-donor evaluation report, a system of accreditation should be developed. Ultimately, however, a far less intrusive and less threatening stance was adopted, whereby the Handbook would be made widely available to the NGOs (and others) – decisions as to whether or not to use it, and how to go about doing so, were left up to each agency.

Finally, it must be emphasized that the development of technical performance standards was not the only objective, or even the principal objective, of the Sphere Project. From the outset, the management committee viewed accountability not only as a relationship between NGOs and their donors, but perhaps more importantly, as a relationship between the NGOs and the populations they seek to assist. A "rights-based approach" was always first and foremost in the minds of the original promoters of the Project. The development of a statement regarding the rights of the Project's beneficiaries proved difficult to craft, and establishing a close and direct relationship between what was to become the Humanitarian Charter and the technical standards and indicators was even more difficult. Strengthening the rights component of Sphere continues to be an issue worth addressing, and the struggle to do so is addressed further in later sections of this report.

B. Accessing the Sphere Project

1. Promoting the Sphere Project

Promotion of the Sphere Project began during the development process, as more and more agencies became involved, through both their indirect participation in the management structure and the direct participation of NGO workers, UN agency employees, and others in the promulgation of the standards and indicators that would come to constitute the technical content of the Handbook. The lists of individuals and agencies that were involved in this monumental effort comprise twenty dense pages of the first edition of the Handbook. In addition, individual NGOs and nine bilateral donors and ECHO contributed financially to the effort. By the time a

preliminary version of the Handbook was publicly launched in London and in Washington in December 1998, only eighteen months after the Project had been constituted, its existence and its objectives were quite well known throughout the humanitarian community.

In our survey, we found that about one-fourth of respondents (24.7%) had heard about the Project for the first time in the early years of 1997-98. In each of the next three years, beginning in 1999, after the publication of the Handbook and the development of the website, about 20% of respondents first heard of Sphere (83, 19.1% in each of 1999 and 2000, 85, 19.6% in 2001). In 2002 and 2003, first knowledge of Sphere fell off, undoubtedly due to the fact that all of our respondents had already been oriented to the Project. (Figure 6)

Figure 6: What year did you first hear of the Sphere Project?

155 (35.7%) did not answer this question
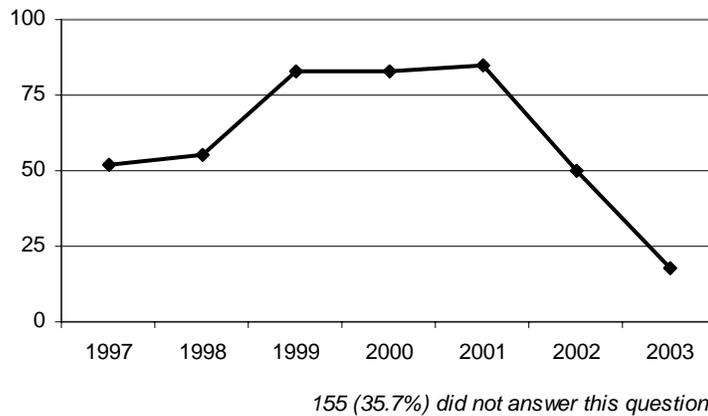
The majority of respondents (313, 72.1%) learned of Sphere through their employers (mostly NGOs). Other means of knowledge acquisition included training courses (52, 12.0%), word of mouth (37, 8.5%), and independent research (14, 3.2%). (Figure 7) A few had been contributors to the first handbook.

Figure 7: How did you first learn of the Sphere Project
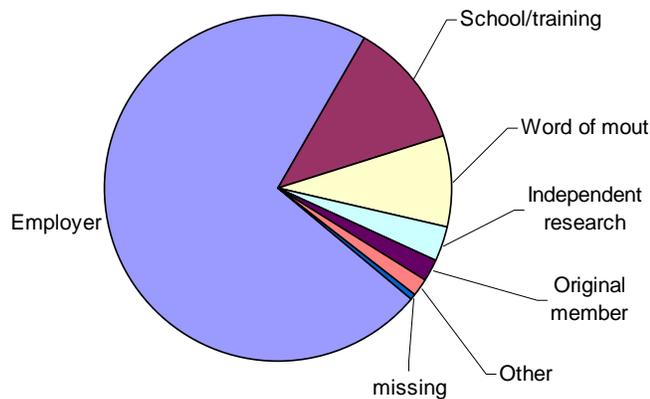
Promotion of the Project also takes place at the project level. It is noteworthy that almost two-thirds of those answering the survey (286, 65.9%) had attended interagency meetings at which the Sphere standards and indicators were promoted. (Figure 8)

Figure 8: Have you ever attended an interagency coordination meeting that encouraged agencies to observe Sphere Standards and/or Indicators?
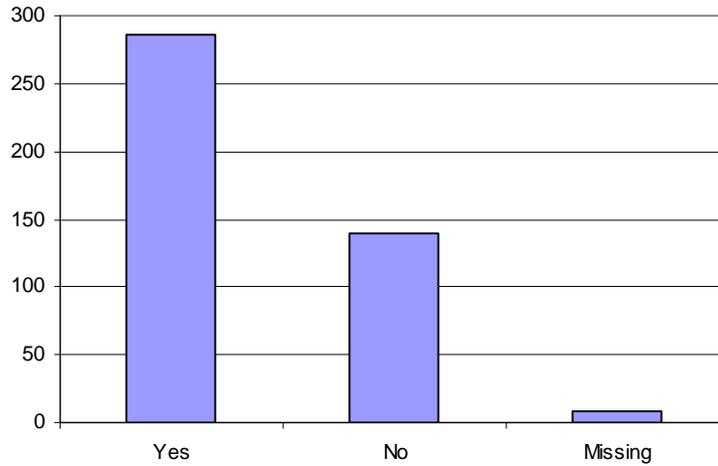
Interestingly, at those meetings, the Project was promoted by a variety of agencies, including UN bodies, international NGOs, local NGOs, and national governments. (Figure 9)

Figure 9: Of those that have attended a humanitarian coordination meeting where Sphere Standards were encourage, what organization encouraged it?
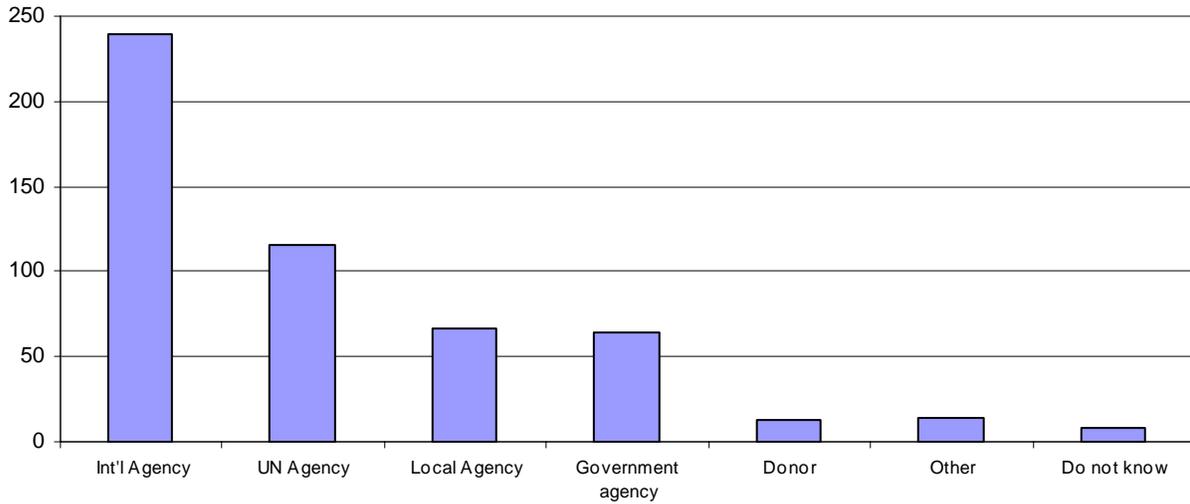
2. Handbook distribution

Several of the original participants in the development of the Project reported that it was difficult to find a publisher for the Handbook. Eventually, Oxfam Publishing agreed to produce it. To the surprise of many, the English version of the Handbook has become the highest selling item in the Oxfam catalogue. With about 30,000 sold, the Handbook is undoubtedly the most popular, and probably the most widely distributed, basic text in humanitarian assistance. (Table 1) The Handbook has also become available in French, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Arabic, and other languages, including Vietnamese, Khmer, Thai, and Bahasa. Independent translation became so popular, in fact, that there are now guidelines for those wishing to translate it to still more languages.

Table 1: Sphere Project Handbook TOTAL VOLUME SALES* (Oxfam Publications)	
English	21,201
French	3,141
Spanish	2,250
Russian	1,262
Portuguese	1,406
TOTAL	**29,260**

As of July 2003

Distribution of the Handbook has apparently been quite effective. Those that completed the questionnaire were asked if they had a Sphere Project Handbook in the office in which they are currently working. The vast majority (382, 88.0%) reported having a handbook available to them. Only 39 (9.0%) did not. (Figure 10) Although this survey about the Sphere Project may have attracted responses from a disproportionate number of Handbook owners, our own observations and reports from many of those interviewed suggest that there has been wide distribution to the project implementation level. (In addition, every student studying in the Forced Migration Program at the Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University and at the Institute for the Study of International Migration at Georgetown University receives a copy of the Handbook. We did not verify that this is the case in other academic institutions, but we know of several others where it is.)

Figure 10: Is there a Sphere Project Handbook in you office?
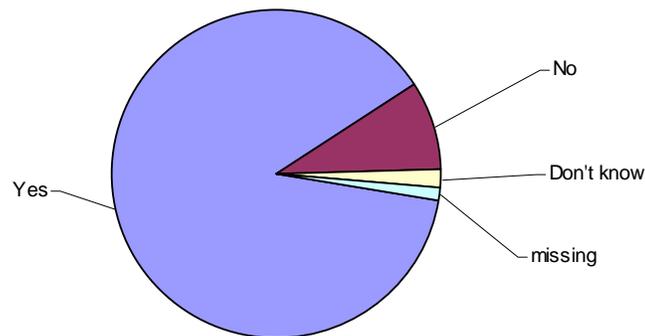
3. The Sphere Project Website

Perhaps one of the most cost-effective and worthwhile means of distributing information about the Sphere Project, and a very important adjunct to the Handbook, was the development of the website (www.sphereproject.org). (Table 2) The first Sphere Project website was actually a part of the IFRC web page starting in 1997. The website became independent in 1999 and the data presents below represents the subsequent experience. The number of visits to the Sphere Project home page on the world-wide web is not only impressive in absolute numbers, but even more impressive in that it has been steadily increasing. In addition, we identified 57 outside web pages that offer direct links to the Sphere Project and there are undoubtedly many more. Finally, entering the term "Sphere Project Humanitarian Assistance" in the Google search engine in late 2003 returned 75,000 hits. This information, taken in its entirety, is good evidence of the widespread reach of the Project and of the very high level of interest it has generated. While there can be no link made between interest and impact, the promotion of the Project, and demand for information regarding it, provide further evidence of the importance that the Sphere Project has assumed in the profession of humanitarian assistance.

Table 2: Hits on the Sphere Project web site 1999 to present		
	HITS	MONTHLY AVERAGE
1999	96,736	8,061
2000	302,205	25,183
2001	1,256,348	104,946
2002	1,633,858	136,155
2003 (Jan-May only)	695,708	139,142
TOTAL	*3,984,855*	

* Estimate based on figures from June 2002

4. Sphere Trainings

The Sphere Project offers a variety of trainings that, according to the Sphere Project website, aim to "help practitioners learn how to apply the Sphere handbook in their work". Part of this application goes far beyond a mere explanation of how to use the standards and indicators in preparing grant proposals, performing assessments, and so on. In fact, a major emphasis of the training courses is on the Humanitarian Charter and on what is meant by a rights-based approach to humanitarian programming. Less, if any, emphasis is placed on training for implementation of the technical standards, and Sphere training, like the Handbook itself, is not intended in any way to give "how to" instruction in technical areas.

Interestingly, the trainings appear to have been successful in addressing some of the important issues, frequently referred to by Sphere staff as "cross-cutting" issues, that the Handbook has been criticized for omitting. In fact, according to an academic in Washington, D.C. who has been involved with the Project for many years:

> *Sphere trainings have covered field protection [issues] better than the [other training initiatives] and better than the technical standards that were the core of Sphere from its creation.* (Academic, Washington DC)

The Sphere Project has offered a range of trainings including interagency training workshops and training of trainers programs. They also provide resources for a 5-day technical course for which didactic materials are available on the Sphere Project website. All of the prepared training materials are available free of charge on the website or through Oxfam Publications. These materials are currently divided into four modules: Introduction to Sphere, The Humanitarian Charter, Sphere and the Disaster Response Project Cycle, and Sphere and Disaster Preparedness.

More than half of those that completed the evaluation questionnaire have attended a Sphere training of some sort (254, 58.5%). (Figure 11) Of those, 92 (36.2%) attended a formal training session lasting between 1 and 3 days, 65 (25.6%) attended a formal training lasting more than 3 days, and 30 (11.8%) attended a training that was not solely focused on the Sphere Project but that dealt with the Project to some extent. Some respondents (40, 15.7%) also reported informal on-the-job training. The remainder learned about the Sphere Project either as part of other course work in an academic institution (13, 5.1%) or were self-trained (3, 1.2%). (Figure 12)

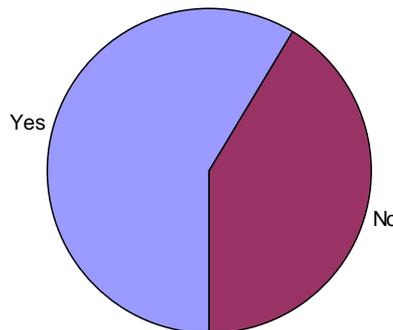**Figure 11: Have you ever been trained in using the Sphere Handbook?**

Figure 12: Type of Sphere training questionnaire respondents have attended
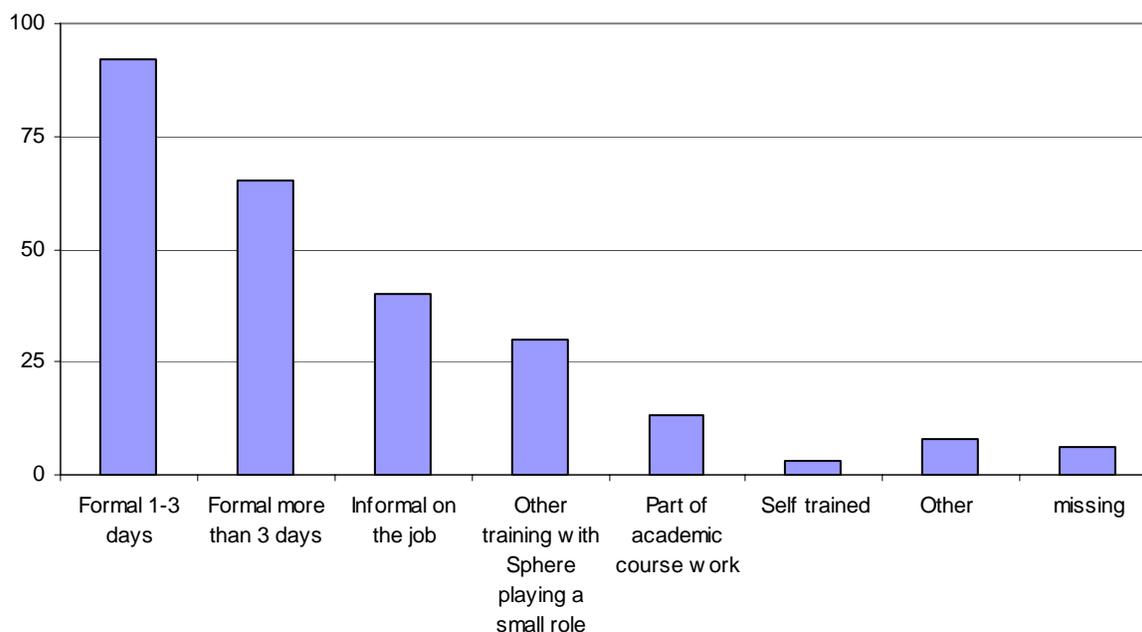
Training of Trainers Courses:

Participation in the Training of Trainers course is a competitive process. From May 2000 to January 2003, seven Training of Trainers courses were held. These were attended by 191 participants chosen from a more than 450 candidates (source: Sphere Project Report on Training of Trainers Courses April 2001 – May 2002 and Abridged Report of Training of Trainers Course #7, January 2003). The goals of the training of trainers courses have essentially been two-fold: to teach the content and applications of the Handbook, and to promote the dissemination and institutionalization of the Sphere Project. The evaluations of the training of trainers courses have been quite positive, and participants have been enthusiastic about their content. Many of the trainers have gone on to develop training programs on Sphere within their own agencies. For one example of many, "since mid-1999 the West Africa regional programme (of Oxfam) has held workshops to explain the charter and the standards" (Mompoint, 2002).

Interagency Workshops:

These workshops focus on the use of Sphere at the project level and also serve as a tool by which aid workers are sensitized to the existence of the Sphere Project. From May 1999 to May 2002 the Sphere Project assisted 30 interagency training workshops around the world. Over 1,200 mid- to senior-level operational managers from the humanitarian community attended these. The Sphere Project is no longer directly supporting these workshops, but they continue to be held, facilitated to a large degree by graduates of the Training of Trainers courses. In its Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for Angola (2003), OCHA requested funding to "upgrade the skills of trainers and sponsor health authorities to attend Sphere workshops." It went on to propose that

"as part of on-going efforts to promote Sphere standards and the rights-based approach, [the project] will also provide training on community-based approaches to return and resettlement." In addition, in the Consolidated Appeal for Eritrea (2003), OCHA requested funds for "capacity building and skills development training of local NGO representatives including Sphere training to government and local NGO representatives." The dissemination of training in the rights-based approach, in the standards and indicators of the Sphere Handbook, and in ways that they might be applied on-the-ground in natural disasters and in complex emergencies has been impressive.

Those interviewed during the course of this evaluation that have attended a Sphere training are, for the most part, profoundly impressed. After attending a training course, many reported that they "finally get it". What they get is, in fact, an appreciation for the rights-based approach and the particular concepts of humanitarian assistance that underlie the Sphere Project. Although their understanding of the technical standards and indicators may have been adequate before their attendance at a training course, it is a new appreciation for the conceptual underpinnings of the Project that usually provokes this response.

While this positive response to the trainings is uniform, and certainly reflects well on the Project, there may be some cause for concern if, in fact, many of respondents needed a training course in order to understand the totality of Sphere. The Sphere Handbook is, as shown above, widely available in print, on the Internet, or through many organizations, and it is distributed in academic institutions as an important reference document. As discussed earlier, nearly 30,000 handbooks have been sold. Yet, only a small fraction of those in possession of a Handbook have ever attended a training course. If respondents to the evaluation survey are representative of the general humanitarian community, and if they gained a vastly increased appreciation of the Sphere Project (and especially of the Humanitarian Charter and the rights-based approach) only after attending a training session, should one conclude that the Handbook, as a stand-alone document, is not maximally effective? If so, given the rapid turnover of personnel working in humanitarian assistance, the implication is that training opportunities need to be greatly expanded and that they need to continue for a considerable time.

Conclusion and recommendation: In light of the finding that the training courses have been instrumental in imparting a greater appreciation for the "cornerstone" of the Sphere Project than the Handbook alone, but with the understanding that the reach of the existing training program is limited and that only a small proportion of humanitarian practitioners can take advantage of training opportunities (even within individual NGOs that offer them), the Sphere Management Committee should adopt and promote distance-learning methods. Self-instructional CD-ROMs, or web-based training with headquarters-based supervision (from either a Sphere training office or from Sphere-trained NGO representatives) could help spread the message effectively. An even better solution might be to examine the current content of the Handbook to determine what would be necessary to strengthen the ability of the Handbook to convey more effectively the notion of the rights-based approach so that it is better absorbed and understood by those who cannot get specific training. Although the Handbook has recently been revised, any further revision should take this point into account.

III. THE SPHERE PROJECT: POLICY AND PRACTICE

A. The Humanitarian Charter and the Rights-Based Approach

In both the introduction to this evaluation report and in the short description of the origins of the Sphere Project the centrality of the Humanitarian Charter and the 'rights-based approach' is asserted. Although opinion may not have been unanimous, and although there were reportedly trans-Atlantic differences in regard to what the adoption of a 'rights-based approach' might mean to the practice of humanitarian assistance, some leading points of view were quite clear. As one founder of the Project said:

> *"[We] didn't want individual agencies to have best practices in specific areas amid an ocean of problems. We wanted broad rights-based consensus. We needed to be able to fly a flag over [the Sphere Project] that said that it was an interpretation of the legal rights of people in emergencies."*

Another contributor to the conception and early development of Sphere agreed:

> *"...to elaborate technical standards to guide agency practice, without reference in any way to the rights or aspirations of the assisted beneficiaries, risks becoming a self-serving exercise concerned more with agencies' accountability to donors and their public....We believe that any set of "industry" standards must first be prefaced by a set of "consumer" standards; a Beneficiaries Charter, which lays out in simple terms what a beneficiary should have a "right" to in a humanitarian crisis."* (Walker,1996)

Rights are, fundamentally, a legal concept. And the Humanitarian Charter is, according to the Handbook, "[b]ased on the principles and provisions of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, refugee law, as well as on the non-legal and non-binding Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief."

When people have rights, others have the obligation to ensure that those rights can be exercised. The Handbook, somewhat paradoxically, states that "[t]he Charter defines the legal responsibilities of states" while, on the other hand, it "is a tool for humanitarian agencies…". This discrepancy was pointed out to the evaluation team by two of those interviewed. An early participant in the Sphere Project, one who was very involved in the development of the Charter, said:

> *"[The Charter] showed that people had rights and that the corresponding duties were held by states or, in the case of war, by the belligerents. It's a political relationship, and it's legally defined. The NGOs, and even the UN agencies, have only a non-formal, moral relationship between the duties and the rights, and the issue was how much they should commit themselves... The role of the NGOs, at least to some extent, ought to be to make the right relationship (people – State) work. The notion of "responsibilization" was quite influential, but it got a little lost in the end."*

In other words, the Charter describes the way things ought to be, but the responsibility for making them that way lies with States. All the NGOs can do is try to influence States to fulfill their duties; if they do not, NGOs must be allowed to intervene (Sphere Project, 2000c:1), and they have a legal right to do so. On the other hand, they are not obligated to intervene, and can

do so when they so choose. Once they decide to intervene, however, many commentators feel that they become obligated to help those they are assisting to exercise their legal rights, and this is what the Sphere Project tries to help them do.

 A commentator who has frequently raised objections to the Sphere Project says, similarly, in regard to the specifics of the Humanitarian Charter, that

> *"The Humanitarian Charter is wrong – you can't pick and choose among laws; you can't extract what you like from a whole body of law. Besides, 'distinction' [referring to the principle of distinction between combatants and non-combatants that is one of the three legal principles specifically affirmed by the Charter] is not for NGOs. And 'non-refoulement' [referring to another of the three principles] is not for NGOs".*

The evaluation found many different points of view regarding the Humanitarian Charter. Many respondents felt that its content and its intention would benefit from further discussion and clarification. The bold effort to introduce a "rights-based" approach to humanitarianism, while welcomed by many NGOs is, after all, only a few years old. A person with detailed knowledge of the Sphere Project put it this way:

> *"The understanding of rights in Sphere is embryonic. We're in Year One of rights development in humanitarianism."*

The technical content of the Handbook, around which there has been greater consensus and, as will be seen below, more extensive use, underwent a major revision during the course of the past year. It has been difficult to get a clear statement as to why the Humanitarian Charter was not also reviewed and, if deemed necessary, revised. Most of those interviewed have expressed the sentiment that reaching consensus regarding the Charter was difficult the first time around – to re-open that discussion might result in an inability of all concerned parties to agree on an updated approach and a more contemporary statement of rights. On the other hand, if there really would be difficulty in obtaining broad agreement on a Humanitarian Charter-like document that is the cornerstone of the Sphere Project, one could ask which is the most important achievement of the Project: the philosophical shift of paradigm in humanitarian assistance from a needs-based, charitable approach, to a legally-grounded rights-based approach, or the more mechanistic compilation, between two covers, of a broad array of existing technical priorities, standards, and indicators.

Conclusions and recommendation: The evaluation team agrees that consideration of the rights of those affected by natural disasters and complex emergencies is underway but not well developed. In the past ten years, in some instances at least partially influenced by the Sphere Project, many NGOs adopted a rights-based approach, in principle if not entirely in practice. Not all those involved in humanitarian assistance are "on the same page" when it comes to being able to discuss the implications of such an approach for NGOs, for UN agencies, for donors, for States, and for the affected populations. The Sphere Project has taken a first step towards firmly establishing the centrality of human rights in regard to emergency relief. It may be time to take the next step. The Management Committee should consider hosting a meeting to engage all those involved, in as inclusive a process as that which resulted in the development of the first edition of the Handbook, to re-assert the centrality of the Humanitarian Charter and to participate in updating it in a way that is consistent with and relevant to current global realities.

B. The Success of the Sphere Project and the Humanitarian Charter

> *"The Humanitarian Charter needs to be woven into the Sphere Handbook more closely.*
> *Currently it is a stand alone document in the Sphere handbook."* (Interview, an academic)

Another reason for reviewing the Charter is that its place within the Sphere Project is apparently not as well understood as the more technically-oriented minimum standards, indicators, and guidance notes. Although there are many elegant defenses of the Humanitarian Charter at the headquarters level of NGOs and in the academic community, there is clear evidence that dissemination and adoption of the Charter at the project site level has not been nearly as successful as that of the Project as a whole. Among the strongest evidence of the success of Sphere is the high proportion of survey respondents who reported using the Handbook in the course of their humanitarian work. Incredibly, (although as has been pointed out, selection bias may affect this result), only forty-two of four hundred thirty-four (42/434, 9.7%) reported not using the Sphere Project guidelines.

However, only a handful of respondents to the questionnaire identify the Sphere Project with the Humanitarian Charter. Of four hundred three written responses to the question, "in your words, describe the Sphere Project and its purpose", only fifty-seven (57/403, 14.1%) even mention the word "rights", "droits", or "derechos". For the vast majority, the Sphere Project was, in fact, that very useful compilation of standards and indicators mentioned above. Sample answers to the above question include:

> *"[Sphere is] a technical, practical handbook we have to refer to..."* (from Madagascar)

> *"An attempt to combine all the experiences in humanitarian aid field work with the aim of compiling a set of minimum standards."* (from Kosovo)

> *"A joint effort...to create rules and standards for humanitarian operations..."* (from Afghanistan)

The Sphere Project has also been a success with governmental donors to humanitarian assistance efforts (see below). Again, however, it is more the notion of technical indicators of performance that seems to appeal to this group than that of ensuring respect for the rights of the beneficiaries. Although only a small and perhaps non-representative sample of individuals from three donor agencies were interviewed (USAID, DfID, ECHO), their views were consistent, as is evident from the following comments:

> *"[Donors] emphasize a needs-based [as opposed to a rights-based] approach. There has been an interesting discussion about this. In regard to the rights-based approach [that Sphere claims to represent]: it would be nice if one could. But there aren't enough NGOs to implement it, the governments can't do it (even if they would want to) and we can't afford it."*

> *"There is tension between rights and needs when it comes to shelter. But [donors] would go crazy if we told them shelter was a right. Can you imagine someone suing the US State Department for human rights violations for not giving them adequate shelter?"*

> *"The Sphere Project was a drawing together [of existing ideas] at the time of its design – 'we've been doing this for a while and now we should be able to write it down.' The rights-based people*

> *sought to hijack that simple agenda. Rights-based programming is difficult. I'm not convinced that the rights agenda is the way to go – it doesn't need to take over, and it may not help."*

On the other hand, there are indications that the Humanitarian Charter is having an effect, at least on the NGOs. Several NGOs, some of the largest among them, have formally adopted the rights-based approach.

> *"Oxfam's reorganization is centered around five sets of strategic change objectives…The third…the right to life and security, is directly related to the use and dissemination of Sphere."* (Mompoint, 2002)

> *"As a human resources manager in the humanitarian aid field, I personally focus on the following areas when I conduct a first interview…what their knowledge is about IHL, Red Cross Code of Conduct, and Sphere."* (INGO, London)

Survey respondents, while not mentioning the promotion of a rights-based approach as central to the purpose of the Sphere Project, did overwhelmingly report (371/581,63.9%) a perception that aid workers have developed a better understanding of the rights of those they work with. It will be interesting to see, in the future, if more and more NGOs accept the rights-based principles of the Humanitarian Charter, while major donors continue to fund humanitarian assistance on the basis of need (and other considerations that are beyond the scope of this evaluation), how the relationship between the two will evolve. Certainly, the contemporary experience of the humanitarian community in preparing for and implementing assistance programs in Iraq is not entirely encouraging. On the other hand, the International Meeting on Good Humanitarian Donorship, held in Stockholm in June 2003, while stopping short of explicitly recognizing the rights of those affected by humanitarian crises did stress the need "to reinforce global respect for international law…".

<u>Conclusions and recommendations</u>: Not all parts of the Sphere Project have been equally successful. For many, the Project is better known for its contributions to the technical sectors rather than for the Humanitarian Charter and all it represents. In addition, some donors seem to choose to concentrate on and to acknowledge the technical portion of the Project while "opting out" of the rights-based approach.

If the Management Committee still feels about the Humanitarian Charter the way it did at time of publication of the first edition of the Handbook (and the introduction to the second edition indicates that it does), strong advocacy efforts should be made to convince NGOs that their country offices and project sites need to be better oriented in regard to its importance and its use. Similarly, efforts should be made to resolve the differences between the NGOs and the donors regarding an appropriate approach to humanitarian assistance (see previous recommendation).

C. A Review of the Major Objections to the Sphere Project

In addition to challenges to the Humanitarian Charter, other objections to the concept and potential consequences of the Sphere Project have been raised in several quarters. It is worth a few paragraphs to review these and to comment. Many of the criticisms that are addressed in

this report can be found in the letter that a number of French NGOs sent to the Sphere Project Management Committee in 1998 (Bodin, 1998).

One prominent argument is that the Sphere Project standards were designed with a refugee camp model in mind and they are not readily adaptable to other conditions. In the short time that has elapsed since the elaboration of the Sphere Project, the nature of the complex emergencies that require humanitarian response has, indeed, changed. The refugee camps of Somalia and Sudan and Ethiopia, of the 1980s, and of Zaire, Tanzania, and Kenya seem to have given way to a new kind of emergency setting that involves very large populations over extended geographical areas with limited access. This report addresses this objection in Section IV.2.a. Essentially, we feel that there is some validity to the proposition that not every guideline of the Handbook is directly applicable to all emergencies. As is pointed out, however, it appears as if much of the problem involves confusion regarding the terminology use by the Sphere Project. The terms 'standard' and 'indicator' are frequently used interchangeably – in fact, most people just speak of Sphere standards when, in fact, they mean Sphere indicators.

The Handbook itself is quite clear on this point. Each of the five 'technical' chapters begins with an identical definition of terms:

> The minimum standards: these specify the minimum levels to be attained in each area
>
> Key indicators: these are 'signals' that show whether the standard has been attained. They provide a way of measuring and communicating the impact, or result, of programmes as well as the process, or methods, used. The indicators may be qualitative or quantitative.

Part of the confusion may stem from the title of the Handbook itself – Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response. The use of the word 'minimum' to modify standards is not accurate. What is presented, in fact, are quantity-neutral standards and the lowest levels of selected indicators that are acceptable if one is to declare that the standard has been attained. As a former Sphere Project employee puts it,

> *"The standards are neutral. They aren't minimum. It's the indicators that are minimum. Maybe it should be Standards and Minimum Indicators in Disaster Response.*

As an example, one need only consider what is perhaps the most commonly misused standard/indicator. Water supply standard 1 is that:

> *"All people have safe access to a sufficient quantity of water for drinking, cooking and personal and domestic hygiene. Public water points are sufficiently close to shelters to allow use of the minimum water requirement."*

This is a neutral, non-quantified statement that has universal value. It would apply equally well in a refugee camp setting in the tropics and in a temperate zone in a developed country. One of the quantitative indicators suggested as a signal of the achievement of this standards is "at least 15 litres of water per person per day is collected." The fact is that in some desert or semi-arid areas, 15 liters per person per day may be more than what is customarily available. In other

situations, 15 liters per person per day may be grossly incompatible with the desired standard of living, even in times of emergency. The indicators may, indeed, be site- or situation-specific, but they should not detract from the universal value of the Sphere standards. Nevertheless, the two are constantly confused.

So, when a UN agency representative said the following to the evaluation team, as an illustration of his perception of the rigidity of the Sphere standards, he was expressing the same kind of confusion that was encountered regularly during the course of the evaluation.

> *"To me, a standard is unchangeable. The current that comes out of the electric socket is a standard 220V. This can not be changed, it is the standard. Imagine trying to apply this kind of rigidity to an emergency situation – it is impossible".* (Interview, INGO Geneva)

In fact, standards are, for the most part unchangeable. But the 220V is not the kind of standard that the Sphere Project has in mind. Instead, the Sphere standard might read, "all people have enough fuel or other source of energy to ensure their ability to carry out their daily functions in a dignified manner". As an indicator of the attainment of this standard, 220V of electricity would be quite rigid – as in the less hypothetical case of water given above, there are times when it would be appropriate, times when 110V would be appropriate, times when firewood or other biomass fuels would be more consistent with the conditions of the local environment, and times when no electricity at all would still enable the standard to be met. In any event, when interviewers took the time to explain the difference between standards and indicators, as the Sphere Project uses them, most agreed that the standards were, indeed, universal, but that the delineation of specific indicators imposed an overly rigid set of 'rules'.

The solution to this problem may be to emphasize the standards and to move as much of the 'measurement' language from the indicators section to the Guidance notes ("specific points to consider when applying the standard in different situations…". In place of the existing indicators, perhaps the Sphere Project could make suggestions regarding what questions humanitarian workers need to ask in order to establish appropriate indicators relevant to the standard in question. Bearing in mind that every emergency has its own unique characteristics, it is the development of an effective thought process, rather than attainment of a specified numerical indicator, that is likely to help NGOs and their personnel respond in the most effective and most appropriate fashion to the needs of the affected populations in the remarkably diverse settings in which they work.[4]

A second argument, or perhaps a corollary of the first, is that blind adherence to the indicators (in the proper sense of the term, although the argument is usually heard referring to the standards) suppresses, in the words of the letter sent by the French agencies, "real professionalism which requires…vision, intuition, adaptability, imagination, and flexibility."

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[4] A full-scale revision of the technical chapters of the Handbook was done at the same time as this evaluation was being conducted (for reasons that are not entirely clear). Review of the technical content of neither version was part of the terms of reference of this evaluation. Still, to at least some degree, the suggestion made in this paragraph appears to have been at least partially followed – in some sections, indicators have been de-emphasized a bit in the new Handbook, and have been moved to the "Guidance Notes" parts of their respective chapters.

The evaluation did hear about and witness examples of where this might be said to have occurred:[5]

- a donor reported receiving project proposals where, for outputs, the applicants, rather than demonstrating any original thought, inserted "see Sphere indicators"
- in Angola, humanitarian workers had built wells in close proximity to a river and were still attempting to extract enough water from them to satisfy the Sphere Project minimum indicators, although a substantial proportion of the population's water requirements (for example, bathing and clothes washing) could have been obtained from the river
- in several recent emergencies, health authorities have routinely organized mass measles vaccination campaigns in accordance with the recommendations of the Sphere Project, despite indications that vaccination coverage among the target population may have been satisfactory
- perhaps the most frequently cited illustration of an excessively rigid adherence to Sphere indicators is that published by Griekspoor and Collins (2001). The authors claim that due to financial and environmental restrictions, adhering to Sphere guidelines meant restricting the number of beneficiaries of a nutritional supplementation program in south Sudan. Only by relaxing the indicators and not even trying to attain the 'minimum', could more people be served, thereby saving more lives.

Again, as implied above, orienting humanitarian workers as to how to attain the standards through a careful analysis of every situation in which they might find themselves, and not through a single-minded pursuit of predetermined indicators, might help minimize these occurrences. In fact, this recommendation is made constructively, and not in criticism of the Sphere Project. Most of the quantitative indicators suggested in the Handbook were found in technical guidelines, some of which were published by the Handbook's critics, before the Handbook was published. Most observers agree that the compilation of these indicators between two covers is an important service and that the Sphere Project deserves credit for having published them in this form.

On the other hand, the next argument goes, as donors become increasingly demanding of NGOs in terms of performance standards, promising to deliver what the Sphere Project suggests may help agencies procure funding for their activities. And, as a consequence, not attaining the standards, for whatever reason, including a lack of financing, or inadequate security or other reasons for restricted access might be prejudicial to an NGO that sought to provide benefits to a population that are not detailed in the Sphere Project or similar standard-setting processes. In fact, some say, failure to attain the minimum indicators might even be the basis for punitive action by a donor or even by a local government authority that felt threatened, in one way or another, by an NGO.

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[5] The evaluation also heard about and observed remarkably creative solutions implemented by NGOs in order to attain the Sphere indicators. One good example, for water supply, is found in the Tanzania case study.

"Where the UN and donors increasingly bind humanitarian aid to peace and other political processes, it is not unreasonable to envisage the use of these standards as a way to marginalize aid organizations whose views do not conform to the prevailing discourse." (Terry, 2002)

In one published paper, the author points out possible political abuse and misuse of initiatives like the Sphere Project by governments, NGOs and other actors. (Hilhorst, 2002) If the adoption of standards (or indicators) is conditional to making funding available, she fears that a humanitarian environment will be created that is inaccessible to new, smaller local organizations or closed to those that do not meet these institutional requirements. Grunewald (2002) argues (and the Sphere Project, as mentioned in the Introduction would agree) that what is contained in the Handbook does not represent the totality of humanitarian action that is required in response to an emergency. Fundamentally, both critics and proponents of the Sphere Project feel that donors, as well as NGOs, need to be flexible and demonstrate, in their funding processes, an understanding of each situation that is arrived at through careful analysis, not the easy and rigid application of quantitative (or qualitative) indicators.

In fact, the donors who contributed to this evaluation also agreed. One donor representative said that

"[we] state in our guidelines that people have to demonstrate the utilization of Sphere or other international guidelines. Sphere is mentioned by name, but [funding] isn't based exclusively on its use. In fact, if they don't use any guidelines, they just need to explain why." (Interview, donor)

The donors also see use of the Handbook as protection against the very kind of situation that Collins and Griekspoor (see above) found in Sudan:

"There were formal complaints in Sierra Leone about the [donor] application of guidelines. [An NGO] thought [a donor] was being too strict with the guidelines and rejecting proposals to do more. Our attitude is to reject the 'luxury' model. The donor can use the Sphere standards to spend less per person while providing services to more beneficiaries. This is an important point." *(Interview, donor)*

Returning to one aspect of Hillhorst's argument (above), concern is frequently expressed that too much attention to the performance standards (indicators) of the Sphere Project will prevent smaller and 'Southern' NGOs from participating in humanitarian assistance to the degree that most would want them to. This argument, as shown elsewhere in this report, may have some validity. From the beginning of the Sphere Project, local NGOs were only minimally involved. Large, and 'northern' NGOs had the strongest voices in shaping the Project. Yet, the technical capabilities of the larger NGOs from developed countries are quite distinct from the many advantages that local organizations can bring to emergency relief. These include, to be sure, frequently underestimated levels of technical prowess, but also an understanding of the economic, social, cultural, and political norms of the affected population, and an understanding of the processes by which things get done most quickly and most efficiently in a given setting.

The value of these bits of knowledge and skills may be under-represented in the Handbook. Mihir Bhatt expresses this sentiment as he describes the Sphere Project's consultative mission to India and South Asia. (Bhatt, 2000). He suggests that, to date, many local NGOs have not heard of Sphere, and that the Project essentially "does not pay much attention to the gritty details of implementation." Unless Sphere is successfully promoted at the local level, and Bhatt sees every

reason why it should be, it will not fulfill its promise. More is presented on this subject later in this report. Evaluation interviews with Sphere Project staff and Management Committee members, and reviews of available documents, suggest that the Project is quite cognizant of this potential problem. Work is being undertaken with the Disaster Management Institute of India and in Central and South America to help institutionalize the Sphere approach in NGOs in a number of developing countries. Even governmental disaster relief agencies, such as those in the Philippines and, to a degree, in Angola, have drawn extensively from the Sphere Handbook in devising their disaster preparedness and response policies. Still, if the intent of the Sphere Project is to be as inclusive as possible, and if this principle is to include NGOs from developing countries in the Sphere process, more thought and more attention should be given as to how the Project might need to be adapted to match existing, and future, needs and capacities.

Other aspects of the Sphere Project may also be singled out for constructive criticism on the basis of the findings of this report. We thought it would be useful to discuss some of major issues that have been frequently brought up in relative isolation. The issues of rigidity of the indicators, relations with the donors, and inclusion of smaller, and local, NGOs are among the most important that the Sphere Management Committee should address.

Conclusions and recommendations: There is widespread confusion regarding the terminology used in the Sphere Handbook. The terms "standards" and "indicators" are very frequently interchanged and misused. Although the 2004 edition of the Handbook tries to make the difference clear (Sphere Project, 2004:8), careful attention should be paid to ensuring that, in official publications, commentaries, and other means of dissemination concerning the Sphere Project, these terms are used correctly. Other conclusions and recommendations regarding the discussion in this section are found elsewhere in the report.

IV. THE SPHERE PROJECT AT WORK

As stated in a previous section, one of the most remarkable achievements of the Sphere Project is the degree to which it has penetrated and influenced humanitarian practice. Among survey respondents who had heard of Sphere, only forty-two of four hundred thirty-four (42/434,9.7%) were not using Sphere. Among those who were, the applications of the Handbook were quite varied and ranged from the preparation of proposals for submission to donors (210/434,48.4%) to the evaluation of program implementation (241/434,55.5%). Other areas in which the Handbook was being put to use included needs assessment, as guidelines for service delivery, for disaster preparedness planning, and even in development work.

The use of the Handbook was widely spread over the technical sectors covered. In the table below, it can be seen that, in each the five areas for which standards and indicators are presented (with the exception of health, which is frequently mentioned as the weakest of the technical sections of the first edition of the Handbook), approximately three-quarters of survey respondents who knew the Project applied the content of the Handbook in their work.

Table 3: In what technical areas have you worked?	Did you ever apply Sphere in this area?	
	Yes	No
Water and Sanitation	148 (77.5%)	35 (18.3%)
Nutrition	97 (75.2%)	28 (21.7%)
Food Aid	138 (70.1%)	48 (24.4%)
Shelter/Site Planning	114 (75.5%)	32 (21.2%)
Health Services	94 (59.1%)	59 (37.1%)

This widespread use of the Handbook by humanitarian practitioners within the technical sectors in which they have worked is a clear indication of the influence that the Sphere Project has had in the profession of emergency relief.

A. Levels of Knowledge

The extent of use of the Sphere Project in humanitarian programs is, indeed, impressive. However, this evaluation found that knowledge of the Sphere Project is not disseminated uniformly throughout the emergency relief community. Important differences regarding the penetration of the Project were found and supported by the survey results and the case studies; these were confirmed in many of the interviews with key informants. In general, people working for international non-governmental organizations report a better understanding of the Sphere Project than those working for local NGOs. Within the former, international personnel are more familiar with the Project than local staff. Finally, there is a clear difference between NGO personnel based in headquarters and country head offices and those working at project sites.

1. <u>International NGOs as compared to local NGOs</u>

Both the Tanzania and Angola case studies revealed important differences in knowledge of the Sphere Project between INGOs and LNGOs.

In Tanzania, six of ten (6/10,60%) of INGO staff interviewed had heard of the Sphere Project compared to one of four (1/4,25%) of the LNGO staff. One-half (2/4, 50%) of the United Nations employees interviewed had heard of the Project. The only local organization reporting familiarity with the Sphere Project was the Tanzanian Red Cross that is, of course, the local affiliate of the IFRC, a strong international agency which has been a major promoter of the Sphere Project.

The numbers interviewed in Tanzania were admittedly small, but a similar picture emerged in Angola. Of the thirty-eight INGO staff interviewed, twenty (20/38,56.6%) expressed familiarity with the Sphere Project while eighteen (18/38,47.4%) had no knowledge of the Project at all. Among the LNGO staff only two of eight (2/8,25%) had heard of the Sphere Project and only one of those reported using the Projects standards in his work.

It should be noted that in both case studies the level of knowledge regarding the Sphere Project was low even among INGO personnel.

Interviews conducted with INGO representatives during the case studies corroborated these findings:

> *"The Local NGOs in Angola are aware of what is expected of them because it is outlined by the donor or by their international partner. They may be following the Sphere standards and indicators but they are not aware of it"* (International staff member of an INGO, Angola)

> *"The Sphere Project is only good for sophisticated international NGOs but not suitable for Local NGOs who often lack capacity and education"* (International staff member of a second INGO, Angola)

> *"The problem in Angola is that only INGOs know about the Sphere Project. LNGOs never mention the Sphere Project. The Sphere Project was created top down and this is a reflection of that."* (Local staff of a third INGO, Angola)

2. <u>International staff compared to local staff</u>

Of the nineteen international employees of UN agencies and NGOs interviewed in Tanzania, fourteen (14/19, 73.7%) knew of the Sphere Project. Of twenty-four national staff only thirteen (13/24, 54.2%) had heard of the Project. In Angola similar results were found: seventeen of twenty-eight (17/28, 60.7%) of international staff compared to only six of sixteen (6/16, 37.5%) of the national staff knew of the Sphere Project. Both differences are statistically significant.

Of interest is that these differences were found even within organizations: in several INGOs, international staffs were found to be more knowledgeable regarding the Sphere Project than national staff. When these same local employees were asked about the objectives of the programs in which they were working they responded by citing the quantitative indicators found in the Sphere Handbook. For example, one Angolan water project manager for a large INGO recited Sphere Project water and sanitation indicators but had never heard of the Sphere Project itself. It seems as if the content of the Handbook that was relevant to this individual's work was being transmitted, but that the 'spirit' of the Sphere Project, including its rights-based approach, and even its existence, was not well disseminated.

Similar findings have been reported elsewhere:

> *"The Sphere standards are not well known among Oxfam staff. Many of the Liberian, Mauritanian, and Senegalese staff and partners did not know that the manual was available in their offices, nor did they know that there was a videocassette presenting the genesis for the project, and its main goals."* (Mompoint, 2002).

3. <u>Place of work</u>

Equally striking results were found when knowledge of Sphere was analyzed as a function of the level at which survey respondents work in the humanitarian system. As seen below, among those who reported a basic to good understanding of the Sphere Project, there is a clear difference regarding knowledge of the Project between those in academic institutions (22/25,

88.0%), those working in agency headquarters, regional offices, or country head offices (275/339, 81.1%), and those working at project sites (80/122, 65.6%), the most peripheral level of the system. Among those with no knowledge or only a minimal knowledge of the Sphere Project, the reverse is seen - one-third (42/122, 34.4%) of those working at project sites belong to this category. (Figure 13)

Figure 13: Knowledge of Sphere by survey respondents and their currently working base
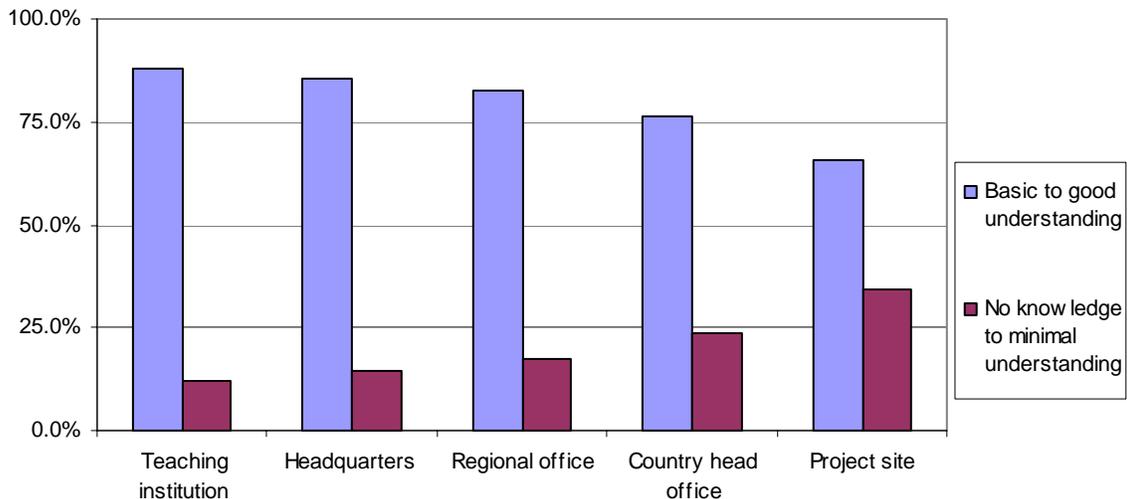
Support to these findings is found in the published literature as well. Commenting on the situation in Southern Sudan in 1998-1999, Maxwell observed that

> *"There was limited awareness among field staff of the existence of internationally established minimum standards for humanitarian assistance. Generally, it was agency head office staff rather than 'front-line' staff who were aware of the Project."* (Maxwell, 2000)

Similarly, Mihir Bhatt of the Indian Disaster Mitigation Institute has written that

> *"Despite the Sphere project's cooperative, collaborative and consultative mission, to many in India and South Asia it remains an 'outside', 'Western', and 'top-down' idea. To get accepted and operationalized, Sphere needs to be rooted in the local experience and reality of relief work. It must be internalized in the operations of government organizations and NGOs providing relief".* (Bhatt, 2000)

It is true that both of these citations are from several years ago and that in many places the situation may have since changed. Nevertheless, in both Angola and Tanzania, Sphere Handbooks were observed in Dar es Salaam and Luanda but not at project sites (in contrast to what was reported above). One INGO representative working at a project site reported that the NGO for which he was working had sent several of its employees to a Sphere training course but that even now there was no copy of the Handbook in the project site office. He reported that this influenced his ability to implement what he had learned in the training.

Conclusion and recommendation: The Sphere Project is not equally well-known throughout the humanitarian community. Humanitarian aid workers, especially local staff, have far less knowledge regarding the Project than headquarters staff and international staff. Implementation of the Sphere Project tends, at least in some places, to be characterized by a "top-down" approach.

The Sphere Project has been working on this issue. All participating NGOs, especially the international NGOs, need to be urged to discuss the importance of the Sphere Project to their work. This means not only focusing on reaching whatever indicators are adopted for a specific setting, but also serving as 'ambassadors' for the kind of approach to humanitarian assistance that the Project tries to promote.

B. Sphere and the Quality of Humanitarian Aid

Whether or not the Sphere Project has had a positive influence on the quality of humanitarian assistance is, of course, a crucial question for the evaluation, but a most difficult one to answer. As pointed out in the Introduction, the answer requires some basis for comparison. However, a time-based (before/after) comparison is impossible: records of the outcomes of relief operations are difficult to find from the period prior to Sphere (if they ever existed), and they would not necessarily be comparable to Sphere-based descriptions of relief outcomes from today, to the extent that those might exist. Contemporary comparisons are also difficult – each emergency has its own political, socio-cultural, and geographic characteristics, a different level of inputs, and a different cast of responding organizations. Finally, one would have to measure the quality of aid – clearly the attainment of easily measurable technical levels of performance would be insufficient.

And even if all of these things could be done and a clear determination of a change (or lack of change) in the quality of humanitarian assistance could be made, it would remain a daunting challenge to attribute this change to the Sphere Project, or to tease out the degree of difference for which the Sphere Project was responsible. Both before and since the advent of the Sphere Project, a large number of initiatives, processes, and tools intended to improve the quality of humanitarian assistance has been developed and applied. (Figure 14) Sphere is one of the major ones (in fact, its place in the array of tools presented below is, again, a powerful testament to the influence it has had), but certainly not the only one.

Figure 14: Results from ECHO report "Analysis of quality management tools in the humanitarian sector and their application by the NGOs" (Bugnion, 2002)
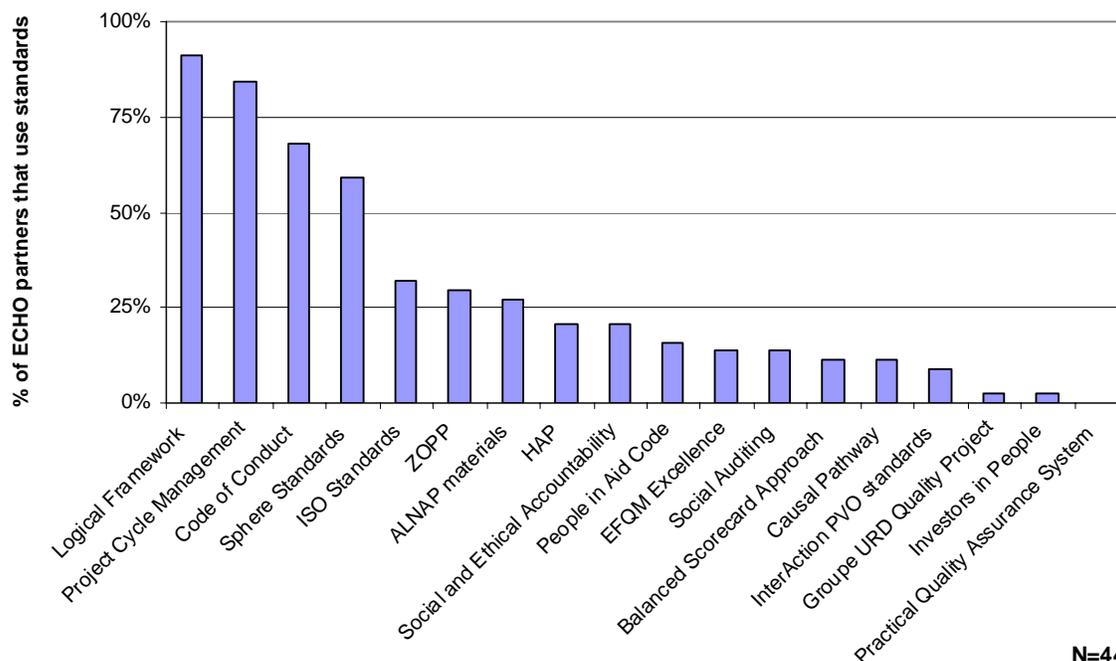
Accordingly, this evaluation approaches the question of whether or not the Sphere Project has influenced the quality of humanitarian assistance through the perceptions of commentators in the literature, from interviews, and from a survey of practitioners, as we have described above.

We found overwhelming agreement among those who completed the questionnaire that, to their minds, the Sphere Project has had a positive impact on the quality of humanitarian aid. Of the four hundred thirty-four respondents (those who were familiar with the Sphere Project), three hundred twenty-seven (327/434, 75.3%) responded this way. Only 4 (0.9%) felt that the Sphere Project has had a negative impact, 14 (3.2%) felt the Sphere Project has had no impact, and 71 (16.4%) were not sure. An additional eighteen (18/434, 4.8%) did not answer this question.

In addition to the closed-ended question, we asked respondents to expound on their point of view. A sampling of their answers is presented below:

In your own words, please explain how the introduction of the Sphere Project impacted the quality of humanitarian aid.

"I believe NGO's are providing higher quality services and aid to beneficiaries, mainly due to the use of SPHERE." (INGO, Serbia and Montenegro)

"It has been pivotal in stimulating unprecedented debate in the non-academic humanitarian community as to the reasons and grounding for our work, how we should do our work and why. While not uniform across the board, it has encouraged more thinking about quality, participation and coordination which has on occasion improved the services provided to beneficiary communities."

"Although the standards are achieved in a minority of situations, it provides a useful consistent target that will discourage agencies from settling for less." (INGO, Canada)

"Both in quality and understanding we are better equipped. There is less 'curfuffle' around what is acceptable and what it isn't - this really decreases transaction costs and increases efficiency." (INGO, UK)

"Whilst adherence to the standards is not absolute, the tool is aspirational and has had the effect of generally lifting standards" (INGO, Geneva)

"I still feel it is relatively early days, and that it is slowly filtering thru the system. Nevertheless there have been many positives, in terms of quality of service and design of programs" (INGO, Australia)

"It has enabled dialogue on this critical subject. It has set standards that should be common to all and hopefully will prevent rogue NGOs from surviving. It has caused folks to consider more in depth their impact on beneficiaries." (INGO, USA)

"Qualified positive: for my own agency the Sphere Project has contributed to a better understanding of quality standards in humanitarian response but we have not collected any direct evidence of this. I expect that it has had a similar effect on other pilot agencies." (INGO, South Africa)

"It is good to have an objective set of guidelines to act as a starting point. It is really a 'back to basics' approach and in itself will not lead to good programming which looks beyond the emergency but it is good in that it gets everyone onto the same page." (INGO, Iraq)

"The impact is unknown, and probably exaggerated by exponents. It is a helpful tool and minimum standards are important. Much larger and more important impacts come from political aspects and the interests accompanying it." (Independent, Ireland)

"I think that the dissemination of the SPHERE project is too recent to have a substantial impact (if ever) on the quality of humanitarian aid"

"Rigidity of standards and discussion about their applicability has distracted people from using their eyes and brains - also the resources which have gone into Sphere have presumably not gone into other possibly more needy areas of humanitarian relief" (Independent, Turkey)

For the most part, the literature (with exceptions discussed elsewhere in this report) has viewed the contributions of the Sphere project quite favorably. Although direct judgments regarding its impact on the quality of humanitarian assistance are hard to find, most commentators, both published and in interviews, have been enthusiastic in regard to the process:

> *"While its impact remains to be seen, the Sphere Project is innovative in its partnership, in its use of seconded agency staff, and in its use of electronic communication and the Internet."* (Smillie, 1998)

> *"Sphere for the first time gives an indication to aid beneficiaries as to the minimum they may expect…from any and all implementing agencies, leading to increased transparency…"* (Bugnion, 2000)

> *"Sphere indicators are…the best to use for outcome measurement. If the Sphere Project didn't exist, we would have had to invent it"* (a representative of a bilateral donor agency)

> *"Has Sphere changed the quality of humanitarian assistance? Yes, it has contributed to an overall improvement. In a qualitative way. And the things that have improved are: the discourse, the thought, and the process of the delivery of services. And Sphere has been part of the landscape in which that improvement has taken place."* (an academician and early participant in Sphere)

In sum, this evaluation found it impossible to directly measure the impact of the Sphere Project on the quality of humanitarian assistance. It reaches its conclusions essentially through a process of deduction from evidence garnered from a variety of sources. On the other hand, it is easier to assess the impact that the Sphere Project has had on the process of delivering humanitarian aid, as suggested by the comment of the last interviewee (above). Nearly two-thirds (269/434,62.0%) of survey respondents reported having changed their programming process in direct response to the Sphere Project, compared to little more than one-fifth (97/434,22.4%) who either did not change their way of implementing humanitarian programs or did change, but as a result of other influences. (Figure 15)

Figure 15: Has Sphere changed the way you design programs?
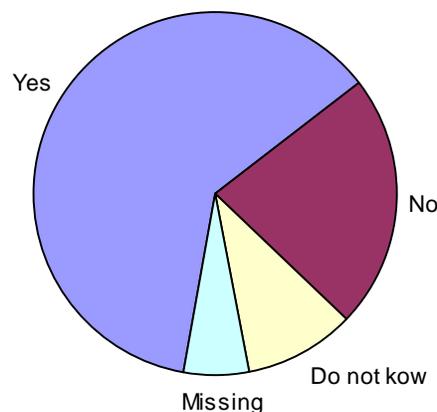
Many elaborated on how the Sphere Project has changed the way they design and/or implement programs. The following are a few representative quotes:

> *"During program design I take into account the minimum standard that was agreed upon by the various humanitarian agencies and this makes it easy for donors to fund the program for there is an accountability right from the beginning; at the same time, we are talking the same language".* (LNGO, Kenya)

> *"I usually refer to the Sphere manual each time I work on a new proposal or report to make sure that I am covering all of the major issues related to work in that sector. Before Sphere existed, I did not have access to any one information source that could provide this".* (INGO, Canada)

> *"More precise assessment, improved monitoring"* (INGO, Mongolia)

In addition to attempting to ascertain the extent to which Sphere had influenced the way NGOs designed programs (a result that could have been affected by donors or other external factors), the evaluation asked respondents to the questionnaire to indicate other ways in which they felt humanitarian assistance had changed, for better or for worse, since they began working in humanitarian aid. (The columns "Better" and "Worse" do not add to 100% because all "No change" responses were omitted, and there were a number of non-responses for each item). Respondents were then asked to assess, on a scale of 1-10, the degree to which the Sphere Project had played a role in bringing about the change for the better (very few attributed declines

to Sphere). For purposes of presentation, the percentages of all responses from 7-10 were combined. (Table 4)

Table 4: In your opinion, how have the following changed since you began working in humanitarian assistance?	Better	Influence of Sphere (% 7-10)	Worse
Coordination between agencies	79.6%	48.7%	16.3%
Service provision	79.3%	55.6%	6.7%
Emergency response	63.0%	49.8%	7.7%
Competence of NGOs	82.7%	59.5%	6.6%
Competence of aid workers	77.0%	56.3%	5.4%
Involvement of affected population	72.3%	46.0%	5.4%
Impact of programs on affected population	77.1%	57.4%	4.1%
Involvement of host population	65.9%	42.4%	7.0%
Aid workers' understanding of rights and human rights law	75.4%	55.9%	8.1%

A high proportion of questionnaire respondents deemed that humanitarian assistance has improved, and about half feel that Sphere has made a significant contribution to that improvement.

C. Does the Sphere Project Work Everywhere all the Time?

1. Geographical Variation

A common observation is that the Sphere Project is more useful in refugee camp settings, in tropical climates, and in the poorest of developing countries. This seems to be the picture that was in the minds of the Project developers. This is no surprise, especially given the influence of the post-Rwanda genocide humanitarian assistance effort on both the motivation to develop Sphere and on its content. Partly for this reason, the minimum standards, and especially the key indicators, are not felt by all to be universally applicable. Data from all sources seem to agree on this point, and some even suggest that this perceived lack of universality weakens the value of the guidance provided by the Sphere Project:

> *"The standards seem to reflect very much the situation in an African context...In other environments they require adaptation. In Colombia, we wouldn't dig latrines but install toilets, for example."* (INGO, Canada)

> *"These...standards arose out of hard-learned experiences of aid organizations responding to complex emergencies...in Africa and Asia. However, crises in the Balkans during the 1990s have put into question the appropriateness of aid organizations using such 'developing country paradigms' for humanitarian response during complex emergencies in more developed countries."*(Spiegel and Salama, 2001)

> *"Some professionals argue the standards, and their respective indicators, are appropriate for accessible and relatively safe refugee settings, while in [more] complex emergencies they may be the ideal but are not really achievable...In certain situations, when standards and their indicators*

are unrealistic, the Sphere Project is considerably weakened as a tool to challenge poor practice."(Maxwell, 2000)

"Although the standards have been generally welcomed, concerns have been raised about their use. One worry is that the main measures apply only to ideal situations in relief camps and that standardization will prevent relief workers from adapting in more complex situations."(Griekspoor and Collins, 2001)

And, finally, from a survey respondent, responding positively to the question "in which circumstances is the Sphere Project useful":

"[In] all disaster settings, although they were clearly written with a camp context in mind."
(INGO, Kenya)

The revision of the Handbook, taking place at the same time as this evaluation, is presumably addressing this issue.

2. <u>Temporal Variation</u>

Another source of confusion that was frequently encountered during the course of the evaluation concerns the value of the Sphere Project in non-emergency settings. The Sphere Project has no control over what is perceived to be increasing use of the Handbook in transitional and developmental settings, for which it is not clearly intended. In Angola, for example, most of those interviewed who were familiar with the Sphere Project felt that the standards and the indicators were just as useful during the transitional phase as they were during the emergency.

Questionnaire respondents were split on this issue, and significantly different points of view were noted:

In which circumstances is the Sphere Project useful?	In which circumstances is the Sphere Project not useful?
"Both emergency and development programs"(INGO, Australia) *"During emergencies most of the time, but they are also useful during the design of development and rehabilitation project design"*(INGO national staff, El Salvador) *"Recovery phase after a disaster"* (LNGO, Haiti)	*"When donors use sphere standards to indicate MAXIMUM standards - which has happened to us"* (INGO, USA) *"Developmental situations where there is no immediate threat to life"* (Academic institution, Boston) *"Development and post-conflict reconstruction"* (INGO, Croatia) *"During the emergency phase of a disaster"**

As discussed above, terminology becomes an issue once again – some of the Sphere standards, at least, may indeed be applicable in all settings. The stated intention of Sphere, however, as is clarified in the introduction to the 2004 edition (Sphere Project, 2004:6) is to place emphasis "on meeting the urgent survival needs of people affected by disaster…". For example, an indicator of the effectiveness of health interventions is, a "decreasing death rate aiming towards less than

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* This comment may be surprising in light of the fact that the Sphere project was designed for the emergency phase of a disaster yet six respondents felt that in the initial emergency situation there is not enough resources or capacity to use the Sphere Project. This comment was included to represent those people.

1/10,000/day", a level which is 2-3 times higher than that in most developing countries during times of stability. (It is interesting to note, in this regard, that some survey respondents felt that the Project is not useful during the emergency phase.)

One problem is that, until the advent of the Millennium Development Goals, which are too general to be used for effective programming, there have been no analogous development standards to those that the Sphere Project has promulgated for disaster response. Given that vacuum on the development side, the Sphere Project is, for many, the most readily available document that can be used to give programmatic guidance after an emergency has been brought until control. Clearly, this is not an optimal situation. As one bilateral donor representative says, objecting to the notion that the objective of development assistance should be to achieve the 'minimum',

> *"Although [the donor] funds relief at the level of minimum standards, we don't really like the fact*
> *that the minimum standards roll over to development. Where is the development community?*
> *They need their own standards. Given the incremental nature of housing development over time,*
> *[the donor] just wants to kick start the process by providing the minimum."*

At any rate, the use of Sphere standards and indicators for developmental programming should be discouraged, as that is not the intent of the Project. It is not the fault of Sphere that it is sometimes used inappropriately, but it would be constructive if those intimately involved with the development and implementation of the Sphere Project could encourage and assist their development colleagues to replicate the Sphere process.

D. Sphere Project Beneficiaries and the Surrounding Communities

One of the underlying principles of the Sphere Project was that populations in need should always be involved in disaster relief efforts. Every technical chapter in the Handbook contains a 'participation' standard: "The disaster-affected population has the opportunity to participate in the design and implementation of the assistance programme."

The Sphere Project intended to increase the involvement of beneficiaries in humanitarian aid by promoting an understanding of their rights and by using the spirit of the Project and the content of the Handbook as the basis for strong advocacy efforts on their behalf. However, the results of the evaluation do not show this aspect of the Project to be entirely successful. Indeed, when asked if they had ever been involved in a humanitarian response that has incorporated the affected population in program design and implementation, three-fourths of the survey respondents (438/581, 75.4%) said that they had. But of those that were familiar with the Sphere Project and had involved the affected population in their programs (336/434, 77.4%), fewer than half (36.9%) attributed this to the influence of the Humanitarian Charter or other aspects of the Sphere Project. For many of these, "involvement" meant consulting the affected population before conducting assessments and surveys. While this kind of consultation is certainly desirable, it does not represent the level of involvement intended by the Sphere Project.

The focus group discussions in Tanzania revealed frustration on the part of the refugees, who felt that their involvement in humanitarian programming was insufficient. Generally, they expressed a desire to have more representation at higher levels of the policy-making processes that

governed camp administration. Specifically, they wanted more refugees in jobs that were held by Tanzanian nationals. Some of their statements follow:

> *"Sometimes we do not know what we are entitled to. We do not know what is there. We receive what we are given. We get what we are given not what we know should be given to us."* (Focus group participant, Kanembwa)

> *"In my opinion, what prevented me from being involved is the lack of trust -- humanitarian organizations do not consider us as other human beings."* (Focus group participant, Lugufu 1)

> *"Another cause that prevents most of us from being involved is the lack of incentives for refugees; for example, sometimes natives can earn more money than refugees although we do the same job."* (Focus group participant, Lugufu 1)

A frequently heard criticism of the Sphere Project is that full attainment of the key indicators can leave the disaster-affected population better off than the surrounding communities. When refugees or internally displaced are involved, some voices call for relief to be equitable in order to avoid the possibility that host populations become envious of their uninvited neighbors.

> *"Relief given to refugees and the basic facilities and services provided to them often surpass the levels that the host population enjoys, leading to perceived and real inequities and injustices. To use minimum quality standards for refugees, while not applying them to the host environment, may create imbalances and, in the end, undermine the preparedness of local populations to host refugees."* (Hilhorst, 2002: 201)

Almost half of the survey respondents (189/434,43.5%) reported having worked in a situation where the living conditions of those being assisted by the international community were better than those of host populations. (Figure 16) Of these one hundred eighty-nine, the vast majority (141, 74.6%) reported that this was especially true in regard to water and sanitation, but shelter, food aid, health services, and nutrition were reported by 48.1%, 45.5%, 34.9% and 33.3% of respondents, respectively, to be better in the affected population than in the non-affected local communities.

Figure 16: Have you ever witnessed a situation where application of the Sphere Standards and/or indicators let to better living conditions for the affected population as compared to the host/resident population?
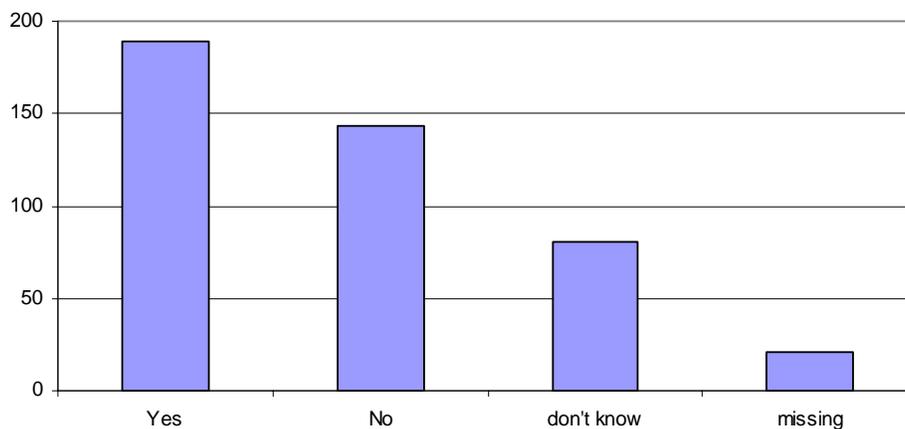
Several of those questionnaire respondents chose to air their views by offering additional comments. These tend to confirm Hillhorst's fears:

> *There are in fact constant situations where Sphere standards profess better standards than those existing in the general population, whereby it becomes unethical to try to apply these standards to the disaster afflicted, rather than dividing resources more equitably. For example, where there is NO safe water in an area and has not been for years, a refugee movement comes though and an emergency project specifies this population should have one water point per 250 persons. But the average community standard is one water point per 2000. Watering down standards is problematic but often essential. Programme design changes in trying to meet Sphere standards, but there should be debate as to whether it is better to have some communities reaching standards yet leaving others entirely bereft due to low development. Sphere standards often cannot be applied despite [our] holding them as essential.* (INGO, UK)

> *"[When the living conditions of the refugee population became better than the local population] the local population became resentful towards the program and the personnel. The program had to adapt and progressively introduce objectives related to the improvement of the living conditions in the permanent community"* (INGO, Canada)

> *"The host community became jealous and refused to cooperate with the IDPs or refugees, and slowly decreased their cooperation with the relief agencies"* (LNGO, Indonesia)

> *"… it caused resentment in the host community and consequently violence"* (INGO, Albania)

Interviews conducted during the Tanzania case study revealed that, according to UNHCR, the government of Tanzania contends that conditions in the camps are better than those in which its own citizens live. Aid workers tend to agree. One INGO has observed higher malnutrition rates in the local population than in the refugee population. According to them, this is due to there being better health services and better food assistance in the camps. In addition, in their area, the local health center was forced to close because its clients, who had been asked to pay a small fee for the services with which they were provided, opted to attend the free-of-charge clinics in the refugee camps.

The refugees involved in the focus group discussions during this case study disagreed.

> *"We cannot say that the living conditions in the camp are better than those of the resident population outside the camp because we have no liberty to travel outside the camp and do our business. We get maize meal … as assistance."* (Camp leader, Karago Tanzania)

Overall, the refugees felt that life in the camp was worse than for the local host population. During the focus group discussions they were asked what the inequities were and they reported the lack of freedom of movement (12, 85.7%), having no land to cultivate (6, 42.9%), and inadequate food (4, 28.6%). They felt that these factors together led to poor living conditions in the camp and, one might surmise, to a less dignified existence.

In this situation, inequities in service provision led to jealousy, dissatisfaction, a redistribution of services (as in the health center anecdote, above), reluctance of the host government to assist the affected population, and appeals for assistance from the local population to the humanitarian agencies that were providing services to the refugees. Some agencies felt compelled to comply with these requests, thereby reducing the level of assistance to refugees, as their funding was

now serving a larger population. While the NGOs all agreed that the host population should be taken into consideration for program design and implementation purposes, they find it difficult to maintain quality programs with the funding they have and, at the same time, to expand those programs to reach those outside the camps. Nevertheless, some NGOs are finding creative solutions to this dilemma. One example is an NGO that is working in a local hospital to improve services there for the local clientele while, at the same time, developing a referral facility for refugees who otherwise would have no access to secondary or tertiary health care services.

In Angola, similar concerns were voiced. There, the discussion was mostly retrospective, since IDPs who were living in camps are currently returning home. Aid workers reported, however, with concern, that the IDPs who chose to live in camps were much better served than those who did not. It is clear that the Sphere Project's role in this situation (and in Tanzania) is indirect at best. Many of the NGOs involved were working toward the attainment of Sphere standards, but it is highly probable that the discrepancy in services between populations served by the international community and those served by local government authorities would have been the same with or without Sphere. One of us (RW) has been faced with this same situation many times in the pre-Sphere era.

The important question is not whether the Sphere Project contributes to the creation of conditions that favor beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance in an unbalanced manner, but rather whether or not the Sphere Project can take steps to correct this situation. Should Sphere standards be adjusted downward to conform to local living conditions if there are gross disparities between Project beneficiaries and the local population? Or should Sphere advocate for NGOs to include local populations in their programs and to apply the same standards and indicators to both disaster-affected and neighboring populations? Opinions vary. But, if Sphere standards and indicators are, truly, the minimum required for survival with dignity, it would be difficult to lower them. One UN agency representative in Geneva had this to say:

> *"Minimum standards can not be lowered even if they are higher than the local population, but we shouldn't put things in place that are higher than the minimum standards. Assistance should always be offered to the host population that is near the affected population. Donors should be encouraged to ear-mark to the region at large".* (UN, Geneva)

On the other hand, a colleague of this individual, working in the same building, felt differently – that equity needed to be maintained, even if that means reducing the levels of assistance that would be required to attain the Sphere standards.

Conclusion: The Sphere standards (and indicators) are being used not only as "minimum standards for disaster response", as they are intended, but also as standards for the transitional stage from relief to development and in some development programs as well. Although the Sphere Project cannot be held responsible for the "mission creep" that has set in at times, the Project, because of its accomplishments, is well-placed to encourage colleagues in the NGO community who work primarily in development, to join forces to develop a Sphere-like Handbook of standards and indicators for post-conflict rehabilitation work. Such an effort would be of immense value in guiding post-disaster recovery, as opposed to strictly relief, efforts.

E. Attaining Sphere Project standards – the realities of the field

As was pointed out earlier, knowledge and understanding of the Sphere Project at the project site tends to be less than that at headquarters level. However, while this relative lack of knowledge may influence the ability of staff to attain the standards and indicators delineated by the Sphere Handbook, other factors play an equally important, if not more important role. The Tanzania case study is a revealing illustration of this point.

Our findings in Tanzania showed that NGO workers (both international and national), UN staff, and donor representatives all expressed concern regarding the difficulty the aid community was having in reaching the minimum indicators. The refugees themselves were, of course, the most frustrated of all. Of particular concern was the food ration. A few months prior to the case study, the general ration had been reduced from the equivalent of 2,100 kcals/person/day to 1,200 kcals/person/day. Although the ration was subsequently increased to 1,450 kcals/person/day, at the time of our study it remained well below the Sphere Project indicator of 2,100 kcals/person/day that would signify the attainment of the relevant standard. This standard states:

> *"The food basket and rations are designed to bridge the gap between the affected population's requirements and their own food sources".* (Sphere Project 2000c:147)

All those interviewed agreed that the distributed ration was insufficient to meet the standard. Refugees were unable to bridge the gap either by growing food within the camp or by purchasing or bartering in the surrounding communities. In the words of one refugee,

> *"The food we are given is not enough for the small chicken".* (Focus Group, Tanzania)

The answer as to why refugees are not receiving enough food in Tanzania is complicated. In fact, there are many other examples in Tanzania and in other disaster settings where Sphere standards are not attained. But, in Tanzania, the near unanimous reason cited for the food shortfall was insufficient funds. And, of course, the shortage of funding affects more than food availability -- several NGOs expressed serious concern regarding their ability to meet the key indicators to satisfy Health Care Services Standard 2 of the Sphere Project: to bring about a reduction of morbidity and mortality (Sphere Project, 2000c:249).

The literature also cites insufficient funding as an important reason why agreed upon standards might not be met.

> *"Even agreed standards (such as Sphere) may be completely unachievable if funding is inadequate or if events (such as continuing conflict) or other actors (such as warring parties or local government) intervene."* (Smillie, 2003:40)

In reference to the on-going crisis in Liberia, OCHA was very clear in its assessment of why Sphere Standards could not be met:

> *"The Sphere Project's <u>Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response</u> were used in designing the programme implementation in the seven sectors (food, health and nutrition, shelter and non-food items, water supply and sanitation, education, and protection and*

coordination) identified in the CAP 2002. The limited response of the donor community to the CAP, together with the deterioration of security conditions, has had a negative impact on the level of achievement of the expected results on the quality of delivery." (OCHA, 2003a:3)

And, similarly, for Sudan:

"Area and sector reviews highlighted the fact that the needs or demands for assistance far exceed present response or supply levels and that, where several agencies are seen to be engaged in one area and sector, their total combined resources are still below the level required to meet minimum Sphere standards in disaster response. (OCHA, 2003a:26)

Issues of funding were of great concern to the survey respondents as well. More than half (236, 54.4%) of those who submitted a completed questionnaire reported that at some time during their experience in humanitarian assistance they had attempted, but had been unable, to reach a Sphere standard and/or indicator (as compared to 121 (27.9%) who reported never having had this problem). Interestingly, of the 236, 152 (64.4%) cited a lack of funds as the reason for their failure. (Figure 17)

Figure 17: Reasons survey respondents reported for not attaining Sphere standards and/or indicators
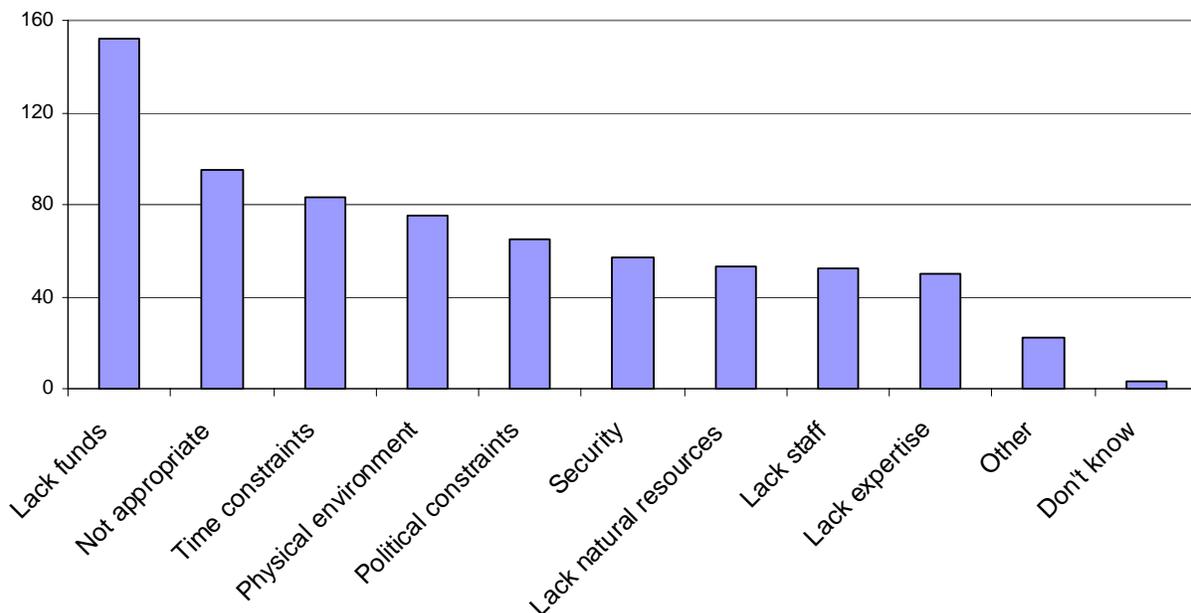
In the field of humanitarian assistance, when one speaks of funding, one speaks of donors. The evaluation found that for the most part donors have embraced the idea of standards and minimum indicators as embodied in the Sphere Project (although, as discussed elsewhere, they have been less enthusiastic in regard to the rights-based approach). In fact, funding for humanitarian assistance projects is often predicated upon the detailed use of Sphere Project or other standards in the project proposal. For example OFDA's grant guidelines instruct:

"For each objective, provide a detailed implementation plan. This should include identification of the targeted population, a description of any goods and services to be provided, and the standard

of delivery used. (One example of an internationally accepted standard is the Sphere Project Minimum Standards in Disaster Response). If the standard of delivery differs from an accepted international standard, provide justification for the variance.” (OFDA, 1998:8)

DFID and ECHO have similar, but not identical policies. Both strongly recommend the use of internationally accepted standards by NGOs applying for humanitarian assistance funds and frequently cite the Sphere Project as a good example of those standards. Like OFDA, neither requires Sphere.

The Disasters Emergency Committee (United Kingdom) does require its grantees to adhere to Sphere standards and to the Humanitarian Charter. Specifically, in its Policy Handbook, it asks its members to

> *“[h]ave a demonstrable commitment to the principles enshrined in the Humanitarian Charter, and to achieving Sphere and People in Aid standards and a willingness to be evaluated against them”.* (DEC, 2003:5)

The question as to why donors, in spite of their approval of the Sphere Project (indeed many donors promote its use and, of course, provide funding to the Sphere Project itself), do not always provide adequate funding to ensure the attainment of these standards in every disaster setting is beyond the scope of this evaluation. Nevertheless, it is clear from the findings that inadequate funding is considered by many to be the principal reason why Sphere standards and/or indicators are frequently not reached. Our interviews with donors revealed considerable sympathy for those who made this claim:

> *“[Reaching and] maintaining the Sphere standards can be expensive, at times they are difficult to implement. Having said that, the standards can illustrate where insufficient resources are being provided to meet a minimum standard”* (Donor interview, U.S.A.)

If donors are increasingly insistent on humanitarian program proposals conforming to accepting international standards, of which the Sphere Project is most frequently cited, then why is funding the most frequently mentioned constraint to the attainment of those standards? Does implementation of the Sphere standards increase program costs to levels higher than those to which the donors are accustomed?   Some of those interviewed expressed their concern that this potential problem might negate the value of the Sphere Project:

> *“If there is not enough money to reach even the minimum level for survival, then what is the point of having a minimum?”* (Interview, international staff, TZ).

Similarly, a survey respondent from a Canadian NGO felt that the Sphere Project is:

> *“Less useful (perhaps frustrating) in the too many emergencies where there isn't a snowflake's chance [in hell] of coming close to meeting many of them, so there may be a tendency to dismiss the entirety”* (INGO, Canada)

These sentiments were in the minority, however. Many more survey respondents and interviewees found great value to using the Sphere Project even in circumstances where it could not be entirely implemented. A summary of the data reveals that the clearly stated standards and

indicators provide a solid framework against which donors and NGOs both can plan their programs and evaluate their accomplishments. One interviewee in Angola reported:

> *"Even if you can't reach the Sphere Standards and indicators, they still give you something to aim for. Conditions in Angola would be even worse without the Sphere Project".* (International NGO aid worker, Angola)

The questionnaire sought to determine specifically whether implementing the Sphere Project increases the cost of NGO programs. (Table 5) Respondents had a mixed feeling in regard to this question. Many respondents were unable, or declined, to answer (148, 34.1%). Of the remainder, 138 (31.8%) answered that Sphere Project implementation does not increase program costs, while 110 (25.3%) answered that it does.

Table 5: Has implementing Sphere Standards and/or indicators increased your program costs?		If yes, in the following technical sectors? *		
Yes	25.3% (110) --------->	Water/Sanitation	77.3 %	(85)
No	31.8% (138)	Nutrition	29.1%	(32)
Do not know	34.1% (148)	Food Aid	43.6%	(48)
		Shelter and Site Planning	42.7%	(47)
		Health services	20.9%	(23)
		Other	9.1%	(10)
		Do not know	17.3%	(19)

* percentages out of 110

Of those in this latter category, three-fourths (77.3%) viewed water and sanitation as the technical area in which program costs were most likely to increase if Sphere indicators were to be achieved.

In Tanzania, on the other hand, most felt that strictly adhering to Sphere Project guidelines resulted in decreased costs. UNHCR in Tanzania coordinates interagency meetings during which the level of NGO services to refugees is regularly reviewed. An INGO representative informed the evaluator that if the level of services in a particular sector is found to surpass the level given in the Sphere Project Handbook, the NGO is encouraged to cut back in that sector in order to allow increased funding to flow to areas in which performance is lagging. If this policy were implemented everywhere, no Sphere standard would be surpassed until every standard was attained. The implications of this approach are potentially far-reaching.

One of these implications is that in order to attain Sphere standards, potentially important programs that are not addressed by the Sphere Project may not be implemented at all. For at least some of its early designers, the Sphere Project was intended to provide standards and indicators for interventions that would result in a rapid decrease of excess mortality in emergency situations. However, its use in the field has, in fact, extended beyond this boundary and into the later stages of emergency response (and even into transitional and development settings, as has been discussed). Education and mental health are frequently mentioned as two disciplines that are of clear importance, even though neither fulfills a major life-saving function

during the early stages of disaster response. An anecdotal report that an NGO-proposed mental health project in Burundi was rejected on the basis of its subject not being included in the Sphere Handbook is a bit unsettling. (Mental health interventions are included in the second edition of the Handbook, and the Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) is developing minimum standards for education in a style modeled after the Sphere Project).

Can the desire to implement the Sphere Project be used to increase donor funding? One expert who was interviewed said:

> *"Sphere can be used to bash donors into action. NGOs must be more confident in this."*
> (Interview, London)

Many (175, 40.3%) survey respondents said they did not know how the Sphere Project has affected donor funding. Of the remainder, 115 (26.5%) said there was no effect on funding, while 101 (23.3%) reported that the use of Sphere Standards had resulted in increased funding to their programs. Only 12 (2.8%) of the respondents reported a decrease in donor funding levels on the basis of their use of Sphere standards. (Table 6)

Table 6: How has the Sphere Project affected donor funding in the following technical sectors?					
	Increased	Decreased	No effect	Don't know	Total
Water/Sanitation	72.0% (67)	4.3% (4)	12.9% (12)	10.8% (10)	93
Nutrition	73.5% (25)	2.9% (1)	14.7%(5)	8.8% (3)	34
Food Aid	70.9% (39)	7.3% (4)	12.7% (7)	9.1% (5)	55
Shelter and Site Planning	73.8% (48)	6.2% (4)	10.8% (7)	9.2% (6)	65
Health services	66.7% (28)	2.4% (1)	23.8% (10)	7.1% (3)	42

In fact, in too many situations, there is no consistent pattern.

> *"Funding was increased due to Sphere in Madagascar regarding soap rations and funding was decreased due to Sphere in Sierra Leone for shelter."* (INGO, South Africa)

> *"Funding has both been denied and received/increased due to sphere in different circumstances in different countries!"* (INGO, UK)

Insofar as the donors are concerned, those interviewed had substantial humanitarian experience, sometimes with NGOs, and in general expressed sympathy with what NGOs were trying to achieve. For the most part they recognize that NGOs will use the Sphere Project to argue for increased funding, and they feel that this is appropriate. Funding to disaster response will never be entirely in the hands of the NGOs, nor will the donor representatives with whom they deal always decide it. Other factors, beyond the influence of those in the humanitarian community, are frequently brought into play. In regard to the funding that is available, one donor representative said that

> *"[b]udget is king at the end of the day. Sometimes [NGOs] say that all of the components of the program are required, but donors can't always do everything. Sometimes the numbers have to be*

ratcheted down. On the other hand, sometimes, donors will doubt an NGO's ability to do everything they want to do. So, it's always a compromise."

Conclusion: the Sphere Project key indicators are difficult to attain in many settings for a number of reasons, among which a lack of adequate funding is among the most important. The relationship between NGOs and donors in regard to the meaningfulness of the Sphere Project needs to be further defined.

V. CONCLUSION

The Sphere Project has been one of the most important and most successful initiatives in humanitarian assistance. There is a widespread perception among NGOs, donors, and other members of the humanitarian community that the quality of the discourse surrounding humanitarian assistance and the quality of humanitarian assistance programs has improved in recent years and that this improvement is due, in part, to the Sphere Project.

The accomplishments of the Sphere Project include:

- the development of the Handbook, <u>Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response</u>. The Handbook, which was authored by thousands of individuals and has been adopted by hundreds of NGOs, has become one of the few standard texts available to those seeking to learn about and to implement humanitarian interventions;

- a web site that disseminates information on approaches to humanitarian relief to literally millions of interested individuals;

- substantial contributions to the published literature – in the six years since the launch of the first Handbook, several hundred publications have made reference to the Sphere Project; the discourse surrounding humanitarian assistance has been profoundly influenced by its existence;

- being one of the major influences in the shift from a primarily needs-based approach to emergency relief to one that recognizes the rights of affected populations. This rights-based approach has affected the thinking and the operations of many NGOs and other humanitarian agencies;

- fostering important changes in the way many NGOs design their programs, to take into account the rights of beneficiaries and to adhere to internationally accepted standards and indicators of performance;

- being used to establish a common language for humanitarian discourse in the field – it is frequently used to help coordinate emergency relief efforts and to give both NGOs and donors an objective way to evaluate their performance.

- finally, and foremost, making a prominent contribution to the perception in many quarters that the quality of humanitarian assistance has improved. Although this

evaluation was unable to measure whether or not that improvement is real, it has been learned time and again that perceptions do matter. The Sphere Project has been accepted, with some exceptions, as having an important positive influence on the contemporary practice of emergency relief.

This evaluation has not revealed any surprises. Non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, and donors alike have known of the influence of the Sphere Project since its inception. It has revealed, perhaps, some of the Project's less strong points, ones to which the Management Committee might choose to pay additional attention during the current phase of the Project. Were the Project to end today, it would have made an important and a lasting contribution to humanitarian assistance. Should it continue for some time, it is well placed to continue to work toward the firm establishment of a humanitarian assistance system in which all non-governmental organizations, from both developed and developing countries, can work together , in partnership with donors and other members of the 'humanitarian community, as well as with those affected by man-made and natural disasters, to attain the standards of performance that are required to fulfill the right of those affected to a safer and more dignified existence.

ANNEXES[*]

Annex 1:   Bibliography
Annex 2:   Sphere Project group members
Annex 3:   Interview Guidelines
Annex 4a: Questionnaire – English
Annex 4b: Questionnaire – French
Annex 4c: Questionnaire – Spanish
Annex 5:   Questionnaire Results – What country are you currently working in?
Annex 6:   Questionnaire Results – What agency are you currently working for?
Annex 7:   Case study results – Tanzania
Annex 8:   Case study results – Angola
Annex 9:   Evaluation Tallysheet of results

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[*] If viewing the CD or other electronic versions of this evaluation, Annexes 4-9 can be found as a separate file