The Sphere Project

*Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards
in Humanitarian Response*

The Core Humanitarian Standard and the Sphere Core Standards

Analysis and Comparison

Interim Guidance, February 2015

SphereProject.org/CHS

Contents

Introduction

Launched on 12 December 2014, the **Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability** (CHS) describes the essential elements of principled, accountable and quality humanitarian action.

The CHS was developed by *Groupe URD (Urgence, Réhabilitation, Développement),* the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) International, People In Aid and the Sphere Project. It draws together key elements of several existing humanitarian standards and commitments, including the Red Cross/Red Crescent and NGO Code of Conduct, the Sphere Handbook Core Standards and the Humanitarian Charter, the 2010 HAP Standard, the People In Aid Code of Good Practice and *Groupe URD's* Quality COMPAS.

The Core Humanitarian Standard (available at **CoreHumanitarianStandard.org**) is a voluntary code which humanitarian organisations may use to align their internal procedures. The full CHS will include guidance notes and key indicators that are currently being developed through a collaborative process. Once completed, the CHS can be used as a basis for performance verification, assessment, evaluation or other aspects of accountability.

The Sphere Project has committed to fully integrate the CHS into the Sphere Handbook, replacing its **Core Standards** (CS) upon finalisation of the full CHS in 2015[1] (the CS are available online at **SphereHandbook.org**). The CHS will not change or replace Sphere's Humanitarian Charter, Protection Principles or the minimum standards pertaining to the Handbook's four technical chapters (WASH; Food security and nutrition; Shelter, settlement and non-food items; Health action).

The purpose of this document is to assist humanitarian practitioners, trainers and other stakeholders to gain a quick understanding of the similarities and differences between Sphere's Core Standards and the CHS during this interim period, particularly as the CHS guidance notes and indicators are in development.

---

[1]   The CHS will also replace the 2010 HAP Standard, the People In Aid Code of Good Practice and its Nine Commitments will be integrated into the Quality COMPAS reference framework.

The CHS and the Sphere Core Standards: a fundamentally similar approach

Having brought together humanitarian standards established by several entities including the Sphere Project, the Core Humanitarian Standard represents an attempt to harmonise standards in order to facilitate more efficient and effective action by the entire humanitarian community.

The **overall intent** of the CHS and Sphere Core Standards is largely the same: communities and people affected by crisis are placed at the centre of humanitarian action and if the standards are applied in practice, they will improve the quality and effectiveness of the assistance provided and facilitate greater accountability to communities and people.

Sphere's six Core Standards describe **processes** that are essential to achieving all the Sphere minimum standards, which are focused on meeting the urgent survival needs of people affected by disaster or conflict. They are a practical expression of the principles of the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and are fundamental to the rights of people affected by conflict or disaster to assistance that supports life with dignity. Sphere Core Standards are qualitative in nature and specify the level to be attained in humanitarian response. Key actions are suggested activities to help meet the standards. Key indicators help judge whether a standard has been met. Guidance notes bring specific points to the attention of the practitioner applying the standards.

The CHS is brief and succinct in its presentation of **commitments**[2], key actions and organisational responsibilities. The CHS describes what organisations and individuals involved in humanitarian response commit to do in order to improve the quality and effectiveness of the assistance they provide. It thus facilitates greater accountability to communities and people affected by crisis, as knowing what humanitarian organisations have committed to should enable them to hold those organisations to account. The CHS nine commitments include quality criteria on how humanitarian actors need to work in order to meet the CHS's nine Commitments. Key indicators and guidance notes are being developed and should be available in early 2015.

Both the CHS and Core Standards reflect and give practical expression to core **humanitarian principles** derived from the legal rights of, and obligations to, those affected by crisis. Both adhere to the principles of *humanity*, *impartiality*, *independence* and *neutrality*, but small differences exist in how the rights and principles framework is described.

The CHS explicitly refers to these four principles, including neutrality, which was brought into the document after some debate. It states: "Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature." A footnote supports varying interpretations of this concept: "Some organisations, while committed to giving impartial assistance and not taking sides in hostilities, do not consider that the principle of neutrality precludes undertaking advocacy on issues related to accountability and justice."

---

2   Although different terminology has been agreed, the CHS' "commitments" are equivalent to Sphere's "standards".

The Sphere Core Standards are informed by the Humanitarian Charter and the Red Cross/Red Crescent and NGO Code of Conduct, which explain the four humanitarian principles and provide context for them in practice. The Charter makes strong mention of the principle of *humanity* and calls "upon all state and non-state actors to respect the *impartial*, *independent* and *non-partisan* role of humanitarian agencies…" (Humanitarian Charter, paragraph 3). The term "non-partisan" is purposely used (instead of the term "neutral") to allow space for different interpretations of the principle of neutrality. Echoing its usage in the Red Cross/Red Crescent and NGO Code of Conduct, the choice of "non-partisan" intends to capture the concept that humanitarian actors must not take sides between warring parties. The principle of impartiality is again referred to extensively in Protection Principle 2.

The fundamental similarity in approach between the CHS and the Sphere Core Standards is not a coincidence, as the latter were already developed with a view to promoting **coherence** with other existing humanitarian standards. In particular, the HAP 2010 Standard benchmarks and the Sphere Core Standards already contained complementary requirements. Core Standard 6 (Aid worker performance) was coherent with People In Aid's Code of Good Practice. Core Standard 1 (People-centred humanitarian response) and 5 (Performance, transparency and learning) were informed by the Good Enough Guide of the Emergency Capacity-Building (ECB) Project, *Groupe URD*'s Quality COMPAS and the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP).

As a new outcome of the same effort, the CHS has clear **added value** through its potential to move coherence even further in replacing standards on which it is based and being integrated into broader quality frameworks such as the Sphere Handbook and *Groupe URD's* Quality COMPAS.

The following table provides an at-a-glance reference for the two sets of standards.

Table 1: The CS and CHS at a glance

Sphere Core Standards	CHS Commitments / Quality Criteria
1. People-centred humanitarian response	1. Appropriate and relevant response
	2. Effective and timely response
2. Coordination and collaboration	3. Strengthened local capacities and avoidance of negative effects
3. Assessment	4. Communication, participation, feedback
	5. Complaints welcomed and addressed
4. Design and response	6. Coordinated and complementary response
	7. Continuous learning and improvement
5. Performance, transparency and learning	8. Supported, effective, fairly treated staff
6. Aid worker performance	9. Resources responsibly used for intended purposes

Comparing the structures of the Core Standards and the CHS

While the Core Humanitarian Standard is a stand-alone document, the Sphere Core Standards are one element in the Sphere Handbook and must be taken as part of this larger approach. The Core Standards serve as a bridge between the principles laid out by the Humanitarian Charter and Protection Principles and the practice described in the minimum standards for technical areas. They are a translation of principles into processes and these principles will remain part of the Sphere Handbook to complement the integration of the CHS.

The following table compares the structure of Sphere Core Standards with the new CHS.

Table 2: Comparison of CS and CHS structures

Sphere Core Standards	CHS Commitments
Core Standards: The qualitative levels that should be attained in humanitarian response in order to uphold humanitarian principles and affected people's rights (also called 'people and processes standards').	**Nine Commitments:** What affected communities can expect from organisations and individuals delivering humanitarian assistance. **Quality Criteria:** How humanitarian actors need to work in order to meet the Commitment.
Key Actions: For each Core Standard, the activities and inputs that will help humanitarian actors meet the standard.	**Key Actions:** For each Commitment, what humanitarian workers need to do in order to fulfil the Commitment.
[No counterpart. However, much of the CS can be seen as organisational responsibilities as well.]	**Organisational Responsibilities:** For each Commitment, the policies, processes and systems humanitarian organisations need to have in place to support their staff.
Key Indicators: For each Core Standard, the 'signals' that show whether the standard has been attained.	**Indicators:** [To be developed.]
Guidance Notes: For each Core Standard, the specific points to consider when applying it.	**Guidance Notes:** [To be developed.]

Quick Location Guide for the Core Standards in the CHS

As the Core Humanitarian Standard represents the harmonisation of already existing standards, including the Sphere Core Standards, elements of these are found throughout the CHS Commitments. To facilitate quick location of CS topics in the new CHS, the following table shows for each Commitment where the topics were addressed in the six Core Standards. The darker the shading in a box, the greater the relevance of a CS to that particular Commitment. For example, CHS 1 on appropriate and relevant assistance is largely focused on assessment, which was the core topic of Sphere CS3. However, CHS 1's key actions also overlap with Sphere CS4 key actions on designing and adapting programmes.

Table 3: Quick Location Guide for the Core Standards in the CHS

	CS1 People-centred	CS2 Coordination and collaboration	CS3 Assessment	CS4 Design and response	CS5 Performance, transparency, learning	CS6 Aid worker performance	Protection Principles *
CHS 1 – Assessment Appropriate and relevant response			●	○	○		
CHS 2 – Design, implementation Effective and timely response	○		○	●	○		○
CHS 3 – Local capacities Strengthened local capacities and avoidance of negative effects	○		○	●			●
CHS 4 – Communication Communication, participation, feedback	●				○		○
CHS 5 – Complaints mechanisms Complaints welcomed and addressed	●						
CHS 6 – Coordination Coordinated and complementary response		●		○			
CHS 7 – Learning Continuous learning and improvement	○				●		
CHS 8 – Staff performance Supported, effective, fairly treated staff						●	●
CHS 9 – Resources Responsibly used for intended purposes	○			○	●	○	○

(● = darker shading / greater relevance; ○ = lighter shading)

* Note that the CHS will not replace the Sphere Protection Principles, only the Core Standards; however, it is useful to consider a certain overlap between Protection Principles and CHS Commitments.

Differences between the Core Standards and the CHS

As the table in the previous section shows, the content of the Sphere Core Standards is generally well represented in the CHS, with some variations in the level of detail. For example, CHS Commitment 1 brings together the assessment, programme design and implementation aspects of the Core Standards. While it provides less detailed information than Sphere CS3 on what to consider for assessments and CS4 on design and response, these differences should be addressed by the forthcoming CHS guidance notes. It is expected that the full CHS package of documentation will provide a similar level of support to practitioners in the course of 2015.

There are some **new elements or different emphases** in the CHS which are highlighted here for Sphere users. These differences are largely the result of three factors: (1) strengthened and/or more extensive emphasis on accountability, reflecting the 2010 HAP Standard, (2) more prominence given to organisations' support to and management of their aid workers, reflecting the People In Aid Code of Good Practice, and (3) learning in the humanitarian community that has taken place since the Core Standards were last updated in 2010.

The CHS includes three **new elements** not previously addressed by Sphere Core Standards:

Public communication of expectations of staff behaviour (CHS 4.1): The CHS states explicitly that organisations should provide communities and affected people with information on how they expect their staff to behave. The Sphere Core Standards do not explicitly address staff behaviour.

Budget monitoring (CHS 9.3): Monitoring and reporting expenditure against budget is an aspect of accountability stressed in CHS Commitment 9 that is not addressed in Sphere Core Standards.

Consultation with affected populations on complaints mechanisms (CHS 5.1): CHS 5.1 is a key action about consulting with communities and people affected by crisis on the design, implementation and monitoring of complaints-handling processes. This inclusion of consultation goes a step further than Sphere Core Standard 1, which has enabling people to lodge complaints and having transparent and timely complaints procedures as a key action, but does not address consultation as such.

There are numerous **differences of emphasis** among the CHS and Sphere Core Standards:

CHS Commitment 2: Effective and timely assistance

Prioritisation of urgent needs: The key actions for Sphere Core Standard 4 include "prioritise life-saving actions that address basic, urgent survival needs in the immediate aftermath of a disaster." CHS Commitment 2 does not mention this explicitly; however, it does emphasise delivering humanitarian response in a timely manner.

Unmet Needs (CHS 2.3): One key action in CHS Commitment 2 is engaging others to address unmet needs, while the Sphere Core Standards focus on coordination and complementarity of

response efforts. CHS 2.3 states, "Refer any unmet needs to those organisations with relevant technical expertise and mandate, or advocate for those needs to be addressed." Sphere CS2 and CS4 mention designing programmes to meet needs that cannot or will not be met by the state or the communities and people affected by crisis, taking other parties' capacity and strategies into account and helping all parties working together for maximum efficiency, coverage and effectiveness.

CHS Commitment 3: Strengthened local capacities and avoidance of negative effects

Strengthening local capacities: CHS Commitment 3 focuses more explicitly on strengthening local capacity than the Sphere Core Standards do, although the latter consistently refer to participation and support to local capacities. It calls on actors to use existing hazard and risk assessments and preparedness plans (CHS 3.2) and gives more prominence to early planning for transition or an exit strategy (CHS 3.4) and promoting early disaster recovery (CHS 3.5). See Sphere CS3 and CS4 for comparison.

CHS Commitment 4: Communication, participation, feedback

Communication: The CHS goes a step further than the Core Standards in committing to information- sharing and two-way communication with and participation of communities and people affected by crisis. While Sphere CS1 has key actions on this subject such as providing access to spaces for community meetings and information-sharing, they are not as extensive.

People's rights: CHS Commitment 4 speaks of communities and people knowing their rights and entitlements and the quality criterion and key actions focus on information-sharing and providing opportunities for participation and giving feedback. Sphere Protection Principle 4 (which remains a core component of the Sphere Handbook) takes this a step further by explicitly stating that humanitarian actors should proactively help people obtain their rights and entitlements.

CHS Commitment 8: Staff performance

Staff safety, security and well-Being: CHS Commitment 8 addresses the need for competent and well-managed aid workers, with the quality criterion focused on staff obtaining support to work effectively and receiving fair and equitable treatment. Sphere Core Standard 6 has explicit key actions regarding staff safety, security and well-being whereas in CHS Commitment 8, these may be viewed as implicit in the requirement for competent and well-managed aid workers. Note that CHS Organisational responsibility 8.9 does state that policies should be in place for the security and the well-being of staff.

CHS Commitment 9: Resources responsibly used for intended purposes

Balancing quality, cost and timeliness (CHS 9.1): In addressing programme design and implementation, CHS 9.1 includes balancing quality, cost and timeliness at each phase of the response. This aspect of ensuring efficient use of resources is implicit in Sphere CS5 on performance, transparency and learning.

The following table provides a quick review of the differences between the CHS and CS.

Table 4: Summary of CHS and Core Standards differences

Topic	CHS	Sphere Core Standards
New elements		
Publicly communicate expectations of staff behaviour	Explicit	Not addressed
Monitor expenditures against budget	Explicit	Not addressed
Consultation in the design and implementation of complaints-handling processes	Includes an explicit call for consultation with those affected by crisis	Consultation is not addressed (although complaints-handling mechanisms are)
Difference of emphasis		
Prioritise urgent needs	Implicit	Explicit
Engage others to address unmet needs	Calls for taking a proactive role	Implicit through coordination
Strengthen local capacities	Given more prominence	Given less prominence
Provide for extensive communication with those affected by crisis	More extensive	Less extensive
Help people obtain their rights	Not explicit	Protection Principle 4 calls for taking a proactive role
Support staff safety, security, well-being	Less explicit	More explicit
Balance quality, cost and timeliness	Explicit	Implicit

Conclusion

The broad and inclusive consultation and harmonisation process that led to the development of the CHS succeeded in effectively reflecting the Sphere Core Standards in the CHS. Current users of the Sphere Handbook will likely find it relatively easy to take into account the CHS's enhanced accountability and aid worker elements, as well as its reflection of recent learning in humanitarian response. All of these adjustments promise to help achieve the humanitarian community's overarching goal of improved quality and effectiveness of humanitarian action and improved accountability to communities and people affected by crisis.

◆◆◆